



# MODEWARRE

HOME GROUND

PATRICIA SYKES

 SPINIFEX





Photo: Deb Lewis

Patricia Sykes lives and writes in the Dandenong Ranges, Victoria. She has received New Work grants from the Australia Council and Arts Victoria. Her first collection, *Wire Dancing* (Spinifex Press, 1999) was commended in the Anne Elder and the Mary Gilmore awards for 2000. This is her second collection.

## OTHER BOOKS

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*Women's Circus: Leaping off the edge* (co-editor, 1997)

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*for my sons Terry and Warren*

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The line, ‘Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?’, which I’ve used as the inscription to ‘dis-locations . . . a polemic’, is from the poem ‘The Garden Shukkei-en’ in *The Angel of History* by Carolyn Forché (1994, Harper Collins).

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# HOUSE OF THE BIRD



# Modewarre — ways you might approach it

## 1 difficulties with maps

because the syllables  
on the page are not  
the land beneath the name

because a childhood memory  
of place is not the same lake  
upon which the duck floats

because a grandmother  
got Modewarre factually wrong  
as '*that backwater*

*where snakes come backwards  
out of their holes'*

and because of the woman

with the head of a bird  
who placed her ancient skull  
in a cold stare against my own

the implacable kiss—  
a silence inhuman  
in its lack

her visible intent  
to be a disturbance  
in the blood

as a pulse which meanders  
among the maps  
which do not exist

## 2 acts of identity

because this is a place of death  
it is necessary to resort to books  
skin of the plant on which ink

mimics the intrinsic knowledge  
of worms      who being earthed  
have their heads deep into it

doubly advantaged by there-ness  
and an un-need for meanings  
it's the humming plastics though

of telephone speech not of worm  
or page which confirms 'yeah . . .  
*modewarre . . . it's Wathaurong*

*means musk duck'*      (place of?)  
laconic breeze of the vernacular  
laid over enforced extinction

of a language      the whole country  
dotted with such deaths  
but in the phone voice the absence

of revenge mocks any expectation  
of it     by the Wathaurong co-op  
I'm helped to understand

that research is on the road  
to raise the culture up  
I'm helped on to Bruce Pascoe

who helps me on to the posthumous  
Lou Lane her boxed white pages  
in the Geelong Records Office

un-indexed are fraught  
with European-in-origin  
local-by-birth     offspring

of the irony of method  
working for years to retrieve  
what cannot be given back

all breath here is spent or spending—  
bird you flee from the archives  
like a patient escaping the knife

and now again the road is a bare desk  
and you a dark-feather creature  
since the time before biblical

like wings against distance  
growing now more lucid  
now less clear     unto yourself

and a speck also        burning  
and watering in the eye like a splinter  
out of this a lake rises and rises

it may yet prove an inland sea  
the wraith of it says *yes let the eyes weep*  
*let them        they have need of consequences*

### 3 ancestral

three roads meeting in the one bird:

*modewarre* (the indigenous)

*biziura lobata* (the colonial)

*musk duck* (the common)

between them everything ancestral  
their one lung the breath  
below water and above it

*'and so I am of the junction*  
*and so my tongue rises to be born'*  
had she lived to draw breath

my mother's last stillborn  
may well have said this—  
but would she have meant born

to communal or to corporate?  
in the epochs of takeover  
the umbilical is as necessary

as lifeline  
the duck delivers and delivers  
the shining eye of water

the play and gleam of it  
as it rolls lightly off the feathers  
back into its own cup

if it were as possible to live  
in the recombined moment  
but we accrue as the roads accrue

and the accretions become  
at their worst a flotilla  
siblings of the first fleet

the wretched journey  
that came ashore as a haunting  
—as always the modewarre

places faith in its eggs  
yolk and the sun  
breed each other

in the house of the bird  
the embryo in its shell turns  
to the arms of its oxygen

#### 4 generation

the return that began in dirt  
the wet and dry embrace of it  
its reach into every orifice

its hold on the throat  
bird you have drawn me  
to the brown lake      end

of the easy picnic    a food haze  
dying in its own romantic  
and you emerging as the brackish

tang of a bird in water  
that swims so low it seems  
to drown    an in-hiding

a v-wake of dark ribbons  
their glossy drag of secrets  
like a tug in the pulse

it's not your Kulin life I'm after  
its recovering geographies  
but how to go on

from here    my feet  
live off bones      my words  
play across old veins

what I eat I devour  
what I touch fingers me  
with scars      it's the same

new song      progress loves  
the individual      the ethic  
of rewarded self      poetry

cannot speak for the whole  
it is too full of variants  
how then to evolve back to water?

## 5 the bird as it is found

at midday      deep in its brown lake  
—the sun warming the same compass—  
the chevrons and rivulets of the bird's

rippling wake a water entranced  
and the oxygen separating itself out  
in small flashing leaps

at play as an ecstasy of bubbles  
here is proof of the bird books:  
the heavy body      the low swimming

habit      the legs set well back  
for the diving life      the male darker  
grey than the female's brownish

charcoal      he in solitary water  
displaying himself      the inflated  
throat pouch the honk the whistle

the churning splash      a breaking of light  
into shimmer crystals but the people  
are charmed by the swans

and the female musk duck is busy  
feeding her single young  
odd that the books forgot

to note the delicate accuracy  
with which she passes  
lake shrimp to her duckling's

equally dexterous bill  
the swans on irritated  
surface patrol forcing her

to combine evasion with the hunt  
she is good at this  
her predatory skills

keeping swans and duckling  
likewise on edge  
until abruptly hunt becomes preen

one moment the dive  
then the drift to safe water  
a haven among water lilies

pink and waxy with succulence  
dense raft of protective greens  
this is luxury time

this magnet to danger  
as the soft paler belly rolls  
upwards in preening exposure

how quickly the young must learn  
the way of it      the swift massage  
and flick back to hide the beautiful target

the snatched rest a midday snack  
the lake dredge with its steel teeth  
already back in the poisoned

muds      the road traffic  
as the rise and fall  
of familiarity's warning revs

how ironically pure at this moment  
that the current should roughen  
and the clouds come driving in with rain

—chill of the returning hours  
the ducks refreshed in their feathers  
disturbed into moving on

in such safety as is theirs  
their waters still historical  
still urgent to be read

## song of walking

*having come so far, having gone—  
this way and none other  
the ever hidden duck  
who had planned to be a silence  
it is known her voice added weight  
to creator and beginning  
that where she touched air water land  
whoever follows has to make a choice  
'the fish will fight you  
for their lives  
the geese claim their own wings  
against the winter  
the frogs have a reason  
to suspect poisons...'*

breathe! breathe!  
is this why the duck teaches caution?  
how once she gave permission  
for a landing and was invaded  
by desperates sprouting sails  
from their backs? now  
an historian writes of strangers who  
dance to each other upon the shore  
as if they have the sheen upon them  
so that when they spread their footprints  
they can become not plague but proposition  
clearly something hears a music—  
what more is there to say of longing?

## toxic, kiss

### i

whether it was done boldly or with stealth  
whether the faces were strange or known

official or private, when they came  
among the food, in the day, the night

to conduct their little murders

*'modewarre, how far were you  
from the poisoned flour  
the water laced with arsenic?'*

### ii

verse, chorus, anthem, voice  
the history wars of mixed blood

and split opinion  
the duck keeping no records

except for memory,  
here, this place

### iii

—once, our house Modewarre's small timbers  
singing in the night and the stars howling  
because the child heard them

from deep inside the kiss of deadly nightshade  
purple berries and delicious orgy  
smeared across the lips of her pale infancy

we do not call her innocent  
we call her blessed, survived,  
and talk of what can kill

iv

—after all it is safer in the kitchen not to stagger  
food wants always to be trusted but is always in the hands

the duck itself wishes to feed no surgery no medi care  
sister, your belladonna is Italian somewhere else, where

Mussolini lived was fascism ever here?

the duck knows      and the eras      *'don't grieve them'*

—only begin again      where it began as the confidence  
of water      everything touchable, and closer

## duck psalms

### 1<sup>st</sup> psalm

not to deify you, duck, as a god life  
a servant of history          enthroned  
tyrannical          impossibly endowed

and you so dark-grey and immiscible  
only once have I seen your true feet  
they were webbed and animal skinned

and sure of their water, its weeds, its  
muds, the life that feeds and is fed upon  
—bird without need of a reliquary

there's talk of clever nets and night traps  
photography too is on the snatch          praise  
rather to your bird way of tenable and proof

### 2<sup>nd</sup> psalm

the slanting rain-veils across the paddocks  
were never a sign of your coming or going  
you never there beside the child on her knees

who nightly on brown lino was taught feathers  
are skies of angels, heavenly more feasible  
than any duck's power to call down miracles

but she was obstinate that girl and left her ghost  
behind, a hankering for real wings, the flight  
you use only rarely it seems, as if having this  
is reason neither for jubilation nor proof, but bird  
when you preen there is a touch of something  
like faith, a pleasure even, that this is so

### 3<sup>rd</sup> psalm

and of course you were there, like a secret  
behind the second eyelid; praise to whoever  
sees without having to be forced; praise to  
whoever looks beyond the lure bird;  
when we came with our firesticks and farming  
it was poverty's golden goose we were chasing  
our hunting skills threadbare and makeshift  
and though we never ate you bird we ate your  
relatives and never called ourselves cannibal

### 4<sup>th</sup> psalm

and now language, so impossibly cumbersome  
for discovering the true weight of things  
the grandmother would have known  
the heft of you, duck, the right size dish  
for the oven; you'd have been her novena  
of gratitude, a meal stolen from the mouth

of starvation      if you were in her grasp  
would I have played ingratitude's child?  
I think your eyes, those black carbons  
  
would have gone the way of mutton  
'food is food' she'd have said,  
'myth is myth'

### 5<sup>th</sup> psalm

our kindling in its fire-making  
lighting neither flame nor image of you  
the kitchen's red music oblivious  
  
to the wind's chimney song of a bird  
we never learned but the pianola days  
could have trapped you, duck  
  
inside the nostalgia of pop song  
*I'll be your angel you be my wings—*  
all power then to the bird that went  
  
about its own lyrics, all honour to  
the same bird whose daily water  
is its necessary choir

### 6<sup>th</sup> psalm

the hymns that lived in our small rooms  
how they flew from our mouths as  
inflations of hope, the art of vanishing

to live among fly specks on the ceiling  
lead paint also lived there  
and the greasy smoke of rations

the war dead and their anniversaries  
over and over the same yearly candles  
but there were incubations, duck

and though we sank our necessary well  
it was not to drain your wetlands  
it was that sweet water meant baptism

each bucketful an evidence of home  
each new infant's deeper chance of roots  
each stillbirth another travel lesson

### 7<sup>th</sup> psalm

when we left in our sad ambulance  
you were still invisibly watered some-  
where between kero lamp and starlight

the unmade roads had no compass  
leading to nest or feeding ground  
our only car pointed towards town

how we were engined and rubber tyred  
there was no-one to make a grief over you  
a corner shop was our new adoration

I think you did not bother to sing praise  
at our going, though it has taken years  
to plot this return to sing *you*, therefore

blessed is the duck whose indifference  
is survival, blessed also is the duck for whom  
worship is a human thing, strange, even pitiable

## conjuring under the influence

the festivals have left for us their careful litter  
all the smoked days between have not killed  
fresco and proof, bird and domain, gold sheaf  
and solar warning                    the mirror wetlands  
always find us                    think of the goddess in  
her ritual room wearing her necklace of ducks  
in the prayer it will ensure both people and bird  
as if '*futile*' never hurt her                    her knowing  
that mutual fertility is no defence                    the rain  
pouring off the window is her own lost river  
the glinting silver speed of it, the cold roar  
I wade the room hunting each piece of broken bird  
there's a neck here stretched like a duck's in flight  
naked and shining    the way feathers gleam their  
oily way through the wet    the wattage droops  
the temperature shivers, which makes perfect  
voltage sense, and still the neck aims itself  
towards the sun, hope and yellow fed, wholly  
adorned by the embroiled heart's freight

## eupathy

under the ribcage  
the magma at red heat  
we meet  
between the furnace and the flying

in the mouth of cohabitation  
beneath that other river  
the air  
dark arc of soaring

when eagles are there  
stream of current and  
thermal beckoning, riddled  
with holes

in open season  
or when eagles as suspects  
were killed by lambs  
these farmed in law

as a greater claim  
so that it was air  
that hovered  
looking down upon

the hung Bunjils\*  
their stopped feathers  
strung wing-tip to wing-tip  
upon the barbed fences

to talk now  
of whether this is still so  
or if the eagles in free flight  
are an option

to speak of  
options, land, again  
once more  
not as that which was taken

is un-ownable  
contracting and crowded  
but as lava shift  
the heat of a river

always underfoot  
in a molten indifference  
to politics, how the height  
of an eagle

---

\* eagle creator being of the Wathaurong

knows this  
its kill days  
numbered to our care  
while brain years plan an escape

to the stars      what difference  
could we commit there  
that would make human  
safer

less  
of a threat?  
do the restless feet  
know

does the orbiting mind?  
or is this just a voice  
from the dark matter  
of fear

afraid of reach  
and plot-based ambition?  
as if should the eagles fall  
so will the piercing eye

## 'brid',\* eight darknesses

i

no belling  
by the identity tag  
no raucous telling of a  
knowledge's secret necessity  
the brid's closed throat  
somewhere warmer  
held, than this gallery  
this arrested buying

ii

to desire flight but be human  
to own legs but come home  
with wings, a falling into  
a sky I must believe in  
no hum to it, no ticking  
only this sung silence  
awake and dreaming

---

\* The name given by Nyangangu to her bird carving.  
Nyangangu is a Yolgnu artist of Northeast Arnhem Land.

iii

the wings infolded  
in a dark body  
the weight in the body  
like floating  
*hush-la, hush-la*  
no lullaby but the blood  
the brid who never sleeps  
its heart's alacrity  
which is machete born

iv

—Nyangangu, you carve  
like peeling back the skin  
inside the brid the next live  
brid, there, where you are,  
bred of earth, breeding sky  
working the uplift, wingbeat  
as if sculpting a refusal  
to die of white history

v

to take broken eggs  
and give them flight  
to take invasion  
and find the sky in it  
how difficult  
how simple  
to place a machete  
inside the tongue  
and sing morning and night  
to keep survival tuned

vi

daughter of the daughter  
of a warrior, the bride  
each day leaving my room  
each day returning, amid  
whether the money I paid  
is a cage  
though air visits us freely  
and daily I warn myself—

vii

it may be financial need  
your living to earn  
but, Nyangangu  
I think you must own  
great faith  
to trust your brids  
to any random house

viii

or not just need but a reaching?  
the brid's upstretched throat  
forever in natal song  
north of this keyboard's  
tireless tap-tap mouth  
which cannot voice  
the interior 'n' in Nyangangu  
the one with the tail  
the sound of 'ng' in singer

## espionage with duck

*if it looks like a duck and talks like a duck  
it must be a government surveillance device*

this not in the wisdom texts  
but in the weird science  
of an artificial eye whose wine  
is calamity in the cellar—  
*I find you in the museum Wiesbaden*  
is really code for *a duck's quack*  
*has no echo*, which is silenced  
easily therefore, the shimmer  
of plumage and gland of musk  
fallen to the gaze, or else to the palate  
where transformation is skill of the chef  
where the bird who once flew becomes  
*meat with hot and cold properties*,  
is a pianist playing, the main course,  
with oranges and wild mushrooms  
and contextual candles melting  
under the heat of Rachmaninoff  
but I think for the woman  
with cutlery still alive in her hands  
the electronic eye makes a worse salad  
its vigilance not half as delicate  
as the wings on her plate

## blandishments and enticements, visuals of electronic speech

a pixel e-bird myriad and reciprocal the  
idea of a poem as multiple rooms slow-  
dragging itself out of the virals it sits  
on a granite slab by the old orchard and  
watches the fruit figs (big, luscious)  
oranges, feijoas, grapefruit, kumquats,  
their aromatics more or less in favour  
of *choose, pick, savour* and recalls  
how dangled food supposedly keeps appetite  
up to its motivation

between fluidity  
and fixity the pilgrim poem begins to turn  
cerulean blue it is thinking of *island*  
as metaphor for *self* and wishes to fly there  
later, an artist friend e-writes me her theory  
that brain cells re-wire themselves when  
new images emerge

some live some die  
we decide our techno-umbilical conversations  
are a thin layer of water clarifying our mutual  
obsession with elements mirroring each other  
as in shredded emotions and the luminous  
Mungo sands it's not the sands that make  
us feel phoney it's the gawk factor, tourism  
in the season of 'going there' our paltry tents

among the dust storms            and thirst so driven  
a kangaroo stealths in to drink the dishwater

*what the moon sees the moon exposes*  
among the now eyes the bones the hard facts sifting  
sifting    old fingers of hunger which cannot settle  
and why should they why should they if it is only  
to make a future comfortable

*‘the grief that can be trusted is the one  
that does not defuse itself in optimism’—*

remember the flocked galahs at the Walls of China  
the wrought change as they stilled their garrulous  
pinks and greys to silence and faced the setting sun  
the sun dyeing the clouds the same tonal flush  
the galahs taking their own colour back into their  
feathers            miracle of re-absorption not even  
the night’s consuming indigo can rob them of—  
continuity without loss?    the final room refuses  
to close itself    as when in dreams some events  
can only be viewed through feathered doors

## eponymous

to the interrogator who keeps asking  
'so are you still suckling on myths of place?'

I say try the enigma address  
the bird who keeps vanishing in water—

if sunrise is the warm traverse across a  
cold face, the glacier, say, in a bird's eye

then *thaw* must be the language of *found*:  
whatever whole or broken thing, this worst

that best, this life, to call it fiend, roof, faith  
to hold its feathers in your hands, to alarm

soothe, confuse, to rephrase the first word  
the last, to cut, paste, discard, worse

to let the boots in, to risk the beak, all the  
shatter things      *stupid!* how six letters

cannot explain why a thing is done  
the bird itself never before so lucid

wanting it undone, wanting the hand  
gone, without its mauling the radiance

## flamingo, flamenco

after all it was a dream the island of flamingoes  
and we are heavier boned not the long leg long  
neck elegance of the gracile gone miocene bird  
*phoenicopterus novae hollandiae*  
fossil tibiotarsi in the lake

how hungry extinction is for marrow  
feathers are never ready to expire  
in the dream so many flamingoes  
they are sun eternal rise sun eternal set  
so many the sky steamily crimson rises  
and rises        haven of the fled briny waters  
reek of the salts in the birds' upside down beaks  
seek and filter        filter and survive

how does it matter  
that the birds were at the gone lakes before us?  
look that leg that thinks it is a young tree dancing  
and that tranced neck gliding through the pink wind  
they could have been a violence    a war    turmoil  
of the heart's valley    what saves us does not save us  
the ghost birds flying up out of the ground the slender  
forgotten ones we don't talk about        as if they are  
only a memory twinge passing through rosy light

and besides (besides!) on the other continents there  
are multitudes greater lesser red leg yellow leg  
flush of the flocks in their breeding thousands but  
here in one bird — a limp body's enfolded wings  
asleep in the dream's lap — lies a wish for the end  
of paralysis on the rim of a bird bath my dead  
grandmother dances again her lifetime candles  
at the edge of a bay my bare feet intercept the final  
undulations of a scarlet fan shell hand clap and  
castanet foot stomp and forage and the sea lethal

and prodigious are you hunting cause? inside  
a climate oscillatory and unpredictable? inside  
the fingerprint of the human aorta? the redball sun  
is an eye trying to pierce through pollution clouds  
we give money to the brain and let it connive  
and always the belief in lyric and experiment

to dream a bird is to decide its future how not  
to fritter its fire how not to confine it to zoo  
or amulet in southern Spain you can sit  
with intimate friends and watch firebirds dancing  
by moonlight in the arid centre the red is in the  
soil is in the rock everywhere the remains  
the bird has already given itself the flame still  
on its feet unafraid of itself unafraid of us



# HOUSE OF WATER



## three years in the flooded paddock

### 1 tussock as sign language

the tussocks so at home  
they pass through the wind  
as if rustle and click  
is the language of clarity  
no word for such voices  
but they're reading you  
in their plant-like way  
siphoning the feel  
of you, the taste,  
the way they'd siphon air  
or ground water  
for what's digestible  
for what's trouble

what never was field  
become paddock become  
fences become livestock  
the cattle the sheep  
foraging for the hoofprints  
they lost the last time  
they departed a shore  
*'this is the way the feet jump'*  
are a child's bare legs  
leaping over the reedy spears

in that awkward straddle  
that knows itself shifted  
between *home* and *home*—  
not every deck as convict  
one tussock capsizing her  
onto hands and knees  
where like a grounded thing  
she is learning mud  
as delicious and terminal

## 2 the burgeoning

the night terrors have nothing to defend  
the butterfly was due to be woken  
susurrus, hiatus, susurrus, pulse rush  
and pause                   muffled thunk of  
the milk urns against her father's thighs  
her barometer man as danger's deep  
bruise, all the fear day building  
to meet his return, since, metal  
and flesh, he might grind the hurt  
between his teeth and bring it home

until then the day will delope and delope  
her sister's small faeces will hit the ground  
as warm plosives each one benign and  
satisfied, she herself will untie the milk  
and loose the calf's frolic and frisk

and she will thank each happy average  
against blood positive crossed with blood  
negative, the Rh, the monkey, the born,  
and the next foetus already on the road  
after which there'll be no more haema-  
globin, for which she has no word  
other than *goblin*, the turkey  
upon her tongue, its mad warning  
pulling the wind into spurts  
from her throat, *gobb-lin*, *gobb-lin*  
though she as third person thinking  
she is safe yet, the waters not having  
broken and the womb like a country  
prepared but here's the truck roaring  
and she is wrong she is wrong

### 3 girl at play on the occasion of her mother's death

the air a cold south and the day not lovely  
her father's knife in the yesterday sheep's throat  
as the same dread now rushing her pulse, the safe  
lamb taken out of her hands, taken out of the cloth  
she'll remember the grey chill clouds prolonging  
the numb hour, a wallpaper thick and suffocate,  
a clag in the lungs, she'll remember every dumb  
sodden thing, the bereft horizon provoking  
her with its shroud, the ticking omnivorous  
minutes, her mother's dress in their wet mouths

here's her own rage (*welcome! welcome!*)  
electric with new tenure—  
are these her dancing feet?  
they are grief's own pistons  
they cannot be consoled  
and so they rise and fall  
and so they crush and crush the day's-eyes  
and so a yellow stench anoints the air  
and so the death bird is lured  
and so she takes aim in its breast  
and so the sky blemishes with red  
and so scavengers gather to the largesse  
and so she spends her breath  
among the feathers and the bones  
and so at last it is over it is done  
and so forever the knife a shining elegy

## an answer to crockery

all the faithful years the well  
giving from its deep hole

and that mouth your cup  
talking and talking of emptiness

as if you are still the small daughter  
furthest from the source, laid down

among inner walls of old hessian  
their cockroach scuttlings and sinister

rat, where moon or no moon  
your safety was the dreams that rocked

that rocked—the warden of urine so asleep  
on your sheets you awoke eloquently

as warm reek      the bedwet as clearest  
author              therefore don't be subtle

admit the fluids of the page are hers  
and require nothing that will dilute her

look, she carries no flask and drinks  
only from the rain

to resurface aqua vitae  
as water's answer to an empty cup

since like a stricken anniversary  
you dry up each winter

for she knows about cold, how it is  
easier then to die without vitality

## doll archive

the doll was always a sleeper  
annually the beautiful swimming  
of ducks must have skimmed her  
and touched nothing but water  
now some hook-toed thing  
finding the pockmarks in her,  
ripples, a widening, to a colony  
of infection, its white useage  
of the Wathaurong women  
the putting them aside after  
as if dolls

*'when glass eyes are oracles  
all you need is deep looking'*

the doll might have written this herself  
if she bowed to the fluency of lenses  
instead she's teaching how to bathe an  
infant    soft nape in the novice hands  
their steady tremble    say it's how  
history unmask us, these attempts  
to hold gently a vulnerable fact:  
is there a hospital for this?

the rasping of crows turning the sky  
dark and clever    contagion is  
sometimes exquisite—consider the gone  
women as a spectral wit    raucous in

humour against the living whose inheri-  
tance is the diseased or healthy body of us  
all        doll my philosophical, extenuating  
no escape        an hour is only an estimate  
the danger's in living without a tax on sleep  
that breath on the pillow        old lung whose  
irruptions make a hole in distant weather

## proximities

- (i) the eyes having returned  
are busy as inlets
- (ii) the geography not as it was  
but the loony girl still here  
still terribly lustrous
- (iii) the lava rocks, how rock on rock  
they are, deep seed and flying dust

—there were other beginnings, tempting, now lost

but take the synchronous eyes as if by naming  
themselves *tidal* they can claim to be interpreters

and the loony girl, as if she's a luminous mooning  
an Andromeda, though neither sentenced nor chained

except by a schoolyard pack who craved a target, limpid,  
mother-sheltered, palely sensible in her big-brim hat

look how she spits into the wind, refusing to play *lost  
child* found, redemptive—it's true she grew among

hagiographies the rocks too are real impossible  
to play favourites, the small grey one which was a slate

smudge of chalk, smear of jam, drool of plum  
or the huge indigo whose breath ached of frostbite

*'fragments do not stand alone'*                      strange transport  
to be pinned here among cold keys, their provender doors

of increasing rust, the plains laying wreaths at our feet  
our pairs of acre children, of the Crown years, advance

and advent, *cops and robbers, what's the time Mr Wolf?*  
and for the modewarre, years of treading water

## Lake Modewarre cryptids

carnal water and the longing for immersion  
all day the bunyips' wash and catastrophe  
disturbances in the crust, the core, lap lap  
at the shore, a swamp harrier hovers,  
around the rim the volcano relics  
old misshapens, old toxics, the wind  
not now a thing of sulphur, instead this  
creature named *most grotesque* of the  
feathered, an isolate, impossible to reach  
in a day's baffled swim, inside her black  
mirrory eye the calm lake floating  
which is not food nor refuge nor God—  
she can smell you fresh from the pages  
too many hours of massacre research  
too many footprints leading too far in  
the wind pulls tears from the sockets  
as if you came for a cleansing, be hard  
hard she says not soft's eternal sinking

## the honey lands

between night's blackout  
and mesmeric kilometres  
the car consuming and dwarfed  
in the way a journey imagines  
itself immortal

infinitude and restlessness  
the always direct wind  
going straight for the orifices  
the thrive the rot the warm devouring

—when did the road get to be so clever  
at smelling out the giveaway itineraries  
as easily as the tracking of salivas?

\*

by the roadside an honesty stall  
offering peacock feathers and quinces

at the edge where all wheels gouge  
the crumbling of sustenance

as if whimsy has worked endearingly  
to outsell the staples

\*

*thrum! thrum! thrum!*  
the corrugations of the home road  
dust's memoirs on the windscreen  
*remember this? this? this?*  
sky and ground remembering roof  
and floor, the house of sex  
keeping a woman pregnant  
as if passion were a weapon  
annual and fatal, alive  
in this engine whose now oil  
the essential is purse of war  
bulge, the agony of an ectopic  
as from its rifting seams, red,  
slowly, blood's viscous leak

\*

slipshift the gloriosa shimmer of  
sunlight upon rainsoaked leaves  
into bone music from under the  
trance tyres, percussion of vertebrae,  
skulls, the terra nullius dead, until  
what will it take to answer them  
not with an ANZAC, day of  
nation my hero, but jawbone  
to cheek     *'in the pain of proximity*  
                  *all excuses are a leaf litter'*  
as falling day, breaking night  
the cave of years keening in our feet  
where nothing dies that is committed  
unless deliberate     unless buried

## aphorisms bluestone and spectral

*autumn* to be at the gate, wind on the turn  
skin of change, yellow, red, final brown  
placing your one life in its circumference

why then fight the old cracked path?  
and the door, the chill mornings  
to stand here holding them apart

is to garner two cold hands      gather  
firewood if you must, the chimney's  
smoke signals will not summon what is lost

*winter* as now the brittle air lays down its frost  
your white breath fraying among the  
classroom dead: the *Henries Edwards*

*Georges* as inscribed in the desks, their  
royal pantheons, their chanted dominions  
—wasn't it you who said rote learning turns

students into drones?      beware you said  
the singsong that kills off native foods by  
wielding against them the livestock of kings

*summer* when nothing is more inclusive than a bushfire  
enjoy the equality of fear  
this is how architecture learns to be redundant

the schoolhouse now more nearly toy size  
brought down out of the bluestone solidities  
that on Saturdays hit sixes to God to come

this way the fire must have an end in view  
in the flushing out of quarry it is merciless  
it's in its nature to send us fleeing for our lives

*spring* Buckley was mostly wrong about the bunyip  
perhaps it was the luscious thaw, the pour of  
fresh water into the lake that made him mistake

as oversize, calf size, a male musk duck full in  
mating uproar to feast the eyes on a beast  
half admired half imagined is to paint a myth

larger than its source; I think he thought he saw  
a regal monstrous thing, let's leave it there  
let no monarchs come hideous and flaunting

## sanctuary: Swan Lake, Phillip Island

*for there is water and there is sky  
and between them feet big with tongues*

i

each act of language a collision, each one  
a shoe        this one a walking default  
in the tracks of a committee

who left signs:    ‘can you believe  
this was once a paddock used for cattle?’  
and    ‘Once a Paddock, now

a Sanctuary’    which makes of the visitor  
a kind of tourist-refugee at a ballet  
where the dancing swans are black not white

but what I came for is seasonal    a lesson  
from the musk duck and indeed I find three  
all female        therefore no mating

only the close feathered swimming  
that means companionable    a time to eat  
between the broods        the noisiest demand

the soft dopple each of them makes  
in their feeding dives a way to cut  
water open without forcing a wound

ii

how the eyes like linguists are never satisfied  
how they'll poke and pry into any lexicon  
the ducks unaware they are being watched  
(the hides silent as isolation cells)  
or so used to reflection as in  
the water-pictures mirrored in binocular glass  
that they've adopted their own dictionary  
of indifference they float like calm boats  
entice the eyes nearer towards ignorance  
until it's impossible to tell if the small  
birds skittering beyond them  
on the camouflage line between water and sky  
are sandpipers or plovers a failure of image  
as language magnified by distance  
identity then as a secret habitat  
the lake concedes at least this much  
what it offers is light the slow  
fingering drift against the skin  
and I think this is how trespass  
might be tamed by vibrations  
so intense it agrees to the muzzle

the day so warm it sheds layers  
a throat could be thirsty with syllables  
and be unable to offer a word

if it has not learned to live  
by native food what could it speak  
that would keep anything else alive?

on the hide's darkest wall  
a namesake has painted a species guide  
among the solitary gloom it is like meeting

a faith in the traffic then the failure of it  
each time the satellites chatter overhead  
the musk ducks avail themselves

of the dive      forgive them  
they confuse speech with death  
and human with predator-as-alphabet

## the efficacy of a lantern on the forehead

*'what do you see when you look at landscape?*

smoke rolling in like funeral fog  
the digital spasms of a water metre  
loose ends, loose, fire and drought  
and a longing for wet calm, but this  
room, that room, the shift, the view  
the next one a Franco, elsewhere dead  
but here enframed

*halo, holy, photograph*

in this house the tended walls tended  
by a woman losing her finger-prints  
her hand palely on his shoulder  
like a vagina defecting from itself  
how can genealogy be so terrifying?  
*we scar each other like dart lightning*  
when she says they're related she means  
he's paid for, deeds of the house, the taxes,  
she spoke once of a Spain where the  
Franco-killed went down on their knees  
here, there, the republic of blood  
yielding less than their names  
but on the last visit there are prayers  
in the food, and red candles among  
their bright flames *her hunger his silence*  
the table's early muscatels in a sugar need  
all the warm vines knowing when a wind

is dangerous            *his hunger her silence*  
as in replete    as in shrine accomplished  
as if    *'ah aromatic aureole    kitchen*  
*of the intellect    pantry of the appetite'*

## **dura mater**

### **1 pre-med**

in the hour before surgery the stones louder  
more musical

*'sibling, sibling'*

feet have seen the woman  
who carries live pebbles under her tongue

feeding the river      and days and nights  
have found their own eyes floating among

them    pinpoint stars    astonished  
to be counted among the debris

### **2 grace notes and your harvest heart**

the foetal life reaped and reaping  
the sedated womb inept

at keeping out the instruments  
whose ancestor is stone:

*life loves you, science is  
rational, wear the God head*

all the soft and hard arguments  
living outside the placenta

but having come from there  
cut, shoved, or eased out

each with its mouth  
open and irrevocable:

*'we all cry like babies if we make the world'*

as if word has come  
of a perfect humanity, how it pours  
through the red stab in the abdomen  
compassionate as money

**3 shatter the breath to come near her**

no oasis but the throwers of stone  
on behalf of a dogma

as if it is necessary  
to break the woman

before the dogma itself is broken  
therefore how she shudders

before the hands, the kin  
of them, their great passion

as it crushes her bone by vein  
to pave the road with—

her face under their feet  
and the passing trucks

heavy with quarried rock  
as if they are carrying

her last voice —afterbirth  
you must be believed

the holy street has drunk her blood  
and you bear down into silence

#### 4 sepulture

among the legends that she came  
through the Modewarre marshes to breed  
and die six feet down between Agnes  
and Adelaide and be called anonymous

and gone, her final stillbirth nameless also  
among the ruby brilliance of seminar blood  
as if all sentiment is frieze, is sepulchre,  
test tubes of the river, litter and pour,

the stumble stones bearing teeth marks  
tender, bitter, bruise the fleshed epitaph  
*warm stone echo breath*, here, where,  
the generations wetting their feet

## profit and loss

the house unrequited  
in the way squalls

drive in from the ocean  
against hot house glass

the windows cannot defray  
their white rush

a trawl of waves  
gnashing and greeting

among the highs and lows  
of post-christmas stocks

whose charts ride and slip  
with the urge to drag skin

over yield curves of satin  
or put feet

to a breakfast floor  
that's not alive with shards

look at this hand  
bearing its steel kettle

all the way to the stove—  
it cannot ignore

the recurrent leftovers—  
like grass brittles in summer

its lips clam and bleed  
investing against thin salivas of loss

## a face in water

*you who left the city with your broken body  
to sculpt what might even further come out of you alive*

*transportation* as when in a time of loss you went missing  
and found yourself river-tranced

a face drying in your hands  
and breathing began again as fluid wish and

introspect, into your body's red depths  
against the injuries, the abattoir

*settlement* the drowsy thrill of being woken at sunrise  
by a flute's refusal to stalk anything

moving to its own heartbeat  
the swoop and catch hours seeming

to trickle here, slow water, navigating  
by the senses, safe almost, cocooned

from the hyper life's furious haranguing  
only the need to *touch, watch*

the ground, the life, neither for temples  
but for templates                      and I've seen

what oozed from you, what sprang  
what might have lain here

longer, colder, food not from  
the vine but of the alluvial tongue

*clay*

the face in its deep hole bleeding water  
through your eye-pits your open mouth

your hands in her, excavated and excavating  
is this how you can begin to walk again

limping and reconciled  
not mud but the idea of mud

plastic and amenable given  
back to you, in the summer of the river



# HOUSE OF DETENTION



## blue heimat

so the migrated self painting itself  
as fish-netted head, half-torso  
with arms left behind, elsewhere  
through the blue window, gone  
to whatever socket they were torn  
from        the left ear facing *now*  
the right eye yoked to *then*  
trapped in the sepia room's dust  
yesterday, today, tomorrow  
three cells, three prisoners  
loyal as fingerprints  
the vast mind's iron bars  
and its sightlines in the breastbone  
all ache, cure, breath, sky, the sailed  
home's blue bribery, blue nostalgia

yes, I can see this, but your blue cow  
who wants to be at home in every world  
where exile does not exist, nor jargon of  
a milk mass produced, only a particular  
udder and its particular cream, here,  
now, in the cranked up days of terror  
where there is no safety in 'either or'  
only the blue cow's teats in your blue-vein  
hands and how delicately you must take  
small enough to keep you both alive

fabulously there is no error, she wears  
no bell, but how inhuman she is  
the way she can gather her blue breath  
and walk off not ever looking back

## hard garbage

spaces cry room cry house  
cry *try me* as if a small  
availability can expand into  
what cannot be afforded  
or is absent      the found  
chance — why should it be  
concrete? you'd think skin  
didn't erupt to its own  
pleasures      and this  
earthquake passing under  
on the scale of unrest  
what would you be riding  
but invisibilities of force  
as would crush earth's  
furniture and yoke

## a ferret in migrant trousers

‘inventory legs in a typhoid year, the delirium of change  
infecting the fear zones where most rats invade the head  
the Nissen huts at Benalla-Benalta place of water place  
of exposure coming alive for post WW2’s hope ships  
& allocation & bedding & cutlery & the sun beating  
down upon the assisted migrants’ new climatic heads  
& they stunned by suffocation’s tin army huts, though  
no sign of jeeps & soldiers & ammo just handy digs  
outside town so the town could sleep safe in its beds  
& in time permit mixed weddings to assimilate the  
local rag & smiles all round then in the churches  
because their congregations swelled like pregnancy  
though religion wasn’t the same ferret as the one  
in the hut of Helmut who loved real ferrets not Hitler  
or God & daily he’d shine his buck teeth into his ferret’s  
heart and once when I’d come to look he took the ferret  
from its cage and put its alive animal self down his trousers  
& my eyes more warned than sexed up because Helmut  
was no scared rabbit no matter what the town wanted’

## Hepzibah

of a childhood as musical  
as birds singing in the arteries  
so the documentary

posthumously not refraining  
but as refrainer her own  
and Yehudi's laughter in a spill

of secrets  
as in the naming themselves  
'those incestuous sonata players'

the taking  
of sister, brother as musician  
not lover, but near  
to this, acknowledged risk

out of the fullness  
the forte, the pianissimo, her passion  
in leaving

the concert halls  
for a career of love, the heave  
and fluency in her fingers

from sonata  
to geo shift  
from delight to illusion crash  
not as if one morning the sun

rose differently  
and bled into her, golden  
and earnest, or as if a wound

from the plum gardens  
made her want  
to change self, world

remind us, Hepzibah  
how you were always  
a thinker, how it was the stifle  
by obdurate privileges

a fatal  
inability to conform, some call it  
restlessness, of spirit

unquenchable  
passion, a provocative politics  
leading to the stalled

marriage, the children  
you left behind more troubling  
to yourself, to everyone—

*'transgression and the mortal coil'*

—how could you have guessed  
my *Snow White Laundry* grandmother  
in despite of, would extol you

though not as more  
fulfilled than her own hands  
strong and steeped, scrubbing  
energy back into your sheets

now that it is years late  
to tell you, and of how those you sent her  
straight from the stressed body heat  
of Jewish evacuees

slowly gave up their horror nights  
growing unafraid of exposure  
drying openly in the wind

—imagine

Hepzibah, all those escaped lives  
billowing in concerto

now that it is freshly  
sounding, now that you are  
returned, more plausibly than  
heroine

to play it over and over

## restitution

sleep's wakeful mode, its profusion hours  
reckoning on one finger the lives of one  
feather, where either fletcher or flight  
to keep the breast warm, the small  
hurrying days anxious to talk  
only of unwinnable Iraq as  
an end's intrusive mess, unnumbered also  
to a suffering's violence, therefore how heads  
cannot in safe purity expect to lay themselves  
upon down pillows and hear *thank you*  
or excessively to drown out, there and there  
how the rich world in its pity, is buying up  
children—in salvage the long wounded conflict

## visa as pessimist

i

*arrival may not be possible*

what companionway

of safe passage

could you pick with confidence

from among

the jostling signs?

among the tossed lives

who reach the coastline

you are among the first

and last

who will be answered

with confusion

ii

in the country of few taps

succour can dry up like water

bones slip and sift

incomplete as archaeology

and present only as clues  
—they might mourn

if it would achieve  
but among spinifex

a passion for the succulent  
goes untended

iii

the patter in the mouth  
the patter in the feet

the great languages  
of word and distance

—to lose where the life  
was born and meet

a travelling caterpillar  
on an outcrop of granite

its orange legs struggling  
over dried fields of lichen

with less difficulty  
than human arrival struggles

towards passport and place

iv

you could track  
the caterpillar and learn

nothing more  
than the desert hides

or between one timetable  
and the next you could replace it

with an azure dragonfly  
whose wings

*(O guard us  
from our ecstacies)*

agitate the memories of flight  
— in the ravaged lands

dread and shadelessness  
move equally together

grief can make of travel  
a family where faces were

## family *Roseacea*

having just discovered  
this is the strawberry's  
tree of the roses  
family of beautiful glow  
and desirable smell  
no way of knowing tho'

if they're imported  
or locally grown  
arriving by punnet  
they're generic  
less heart shaped  
than they're described

it's becoming food-like  
to arrive disguised  
an artifice an additive  
a future's genetics:  
*supply any delicacy*  
*and make hunger submit*

to eat this fruit therefore  
would be to tongue-stroke  
the bank roll  
of any chief executive?  
untouched it could be jam  
for the next arrival

it could be the meal  
for a long detention  
from refugee to leaky  
boat to barbed wire—  
the fruit of travel  
meets new starvation?

to proffer strawberry  
as posy of welcome  
to offer the tillage  
of Eden in the eager  
markets it would  
mean faking ownership

the fruit knife's  
a more succinct edge  
at least it's stainlessly overt  
a steel alive at the throat  
each slice into flesh a chant  
each a blatant economy:

*my quota*

*my subsidy*

*my sweet sweet red*

## great-aunt narrative among the excised islands

*'oh my Canberra . . .*

high city of presumptive cleanness

among the dirty waters exuding  
from the workplaces

the smell of your refusal laws  
—throw gold dust and it would not glitter

with enough camouflage      gild, how  
useful, its ticking riches, its shining tricks

as now it sets off the smoke, the alarms  
the exclusion zones break through the

careful plaster and all the files are ASIIOs—  
*too much pretty money is killing the sex slaves*

the furore excavates silence, activism  
is in the smoking heaps

everywhere the bartered workers die  
it hurts the pocket to say these things

expect no free sex from the groundworks  
erecting doors for the happy trade

the big island and the little islands  
being moved further off only from

sexless asylum hands who do not titillate  
*knock knock, who's there?*

from Capital Hill you can watch the navy  
towing the latest boat away *chug chug*

it says *chug chug* as all its cargo  
disbelieves and poorly fades'

## census of the beloved

*namyrna*, out of your head comes such writings!  
*insepojev namyrna*, her real names  
in disguise against deportation  
'in England it is so far discovered'  
that the names of a thousand infants  
dead within their first year have been  
stolen and given, the fibrillated 'illegals'  
who now own them shift and shift  
and still the postage stamps following them  
like tattoos—*namyrna*, each day the gift of  
anxious waking, each time you bathe, the soap  
inflaming your infancy      quiver the fontanelles  
this body your towel our conjoined fingerprints  
how to breathe quietly, how not to falter when  
touch burns      the questions, entries, exits  
the hours given over to practice      how to live  
nonchalantly in the twined life's furtive rooms

## dis-locations...a polemic

*'Do you think for a moment we were human beings to them?'*

Carolyn Forché

### 1 *née* boat

*'when feet are refused land  
let them dance on the bloody waves*

the opinion polls karaoke and constant  
singing as from a bartered heaven

the feet asking for earth, air, fire, water  
everything perilous and exposed, how do  
they dream of us in their internal oceans?

on the nights fear flows through anxious blood  
stellar money brings the spaceships home, all  
our dangerous corridors where passions rend

asleep or not asleep on intravenous land  
our cradle boat our shipwreck ownership  
as all the votes held in our island hands'

### 2 navigation aid

'there's nothing that cannot be written  
or be accused                    an *us*, a *country*  
a defence force's *enforcement of the law*  
as in *Australia against* the Tampa rescues

as also *against* the drowned ones of the  
SIEV X , and the others, how many, how  
lost as if we practise gross remedies  
to feed the sea's great slop as if under  
the bribe of a coast pulled tight:

*thank you, yours sincerely  
do not join us on the shore'*

### 3 a manner of arrival

'to continue waking is to believe  
anything is possible

for years a father . . .

(not one of those detained  
on soil we'd call foreign to *him*  
but one still at home in the idea of being *safe*)

. . . will tell of how

his daughter one morning  
woke him with an arrival  
that would burn him

how many steps it took  
to reach the unknown vehicle

in his subsistence yard  
he may not remember

but how can he forget the scar  
he was given as a handshake

by one of the nervous men  
occupying the car

who said he was only waiting  
for a friend, and who then

moments later, drove off  
and used himself

as a human bomb  
so that the father

when he learned of it  
understood he had shaken

hands with fire  
and that his daughter also

was burnt  
because she believed

in the act of awakening'

#### 4 internment

'listen, the heart can suture itself  
against rejection, but when love enters  
the needle is a deeper ache

the point of you not you-as-delivery  
from the ocean inside me but you  
as perhaps-daughter who asks more  
than birth and its infant languages

and all I've given you  
is a vast interior of your own  
a bag to breed your own life in  
spirit of water, spirit of blood  
little lung, alive in the breath,  
breathing, breathed upon

your name in the old language generic  
and rubric, a *little white Australian*  
thumbprinted under Barton's 50-word  
dictation test, words as lions and tigers  
against *contamination by inferior races*

but now, and again now  
*2002/2003, summer.*

water under ration  
southern bushfires, northern ice storms  
at the high end of consumption  
the earth holding its breath  
against what we might next do  
hospitals full of the dead, the newborn  
*engineered, natural, perfect, flawed*  
and of the traumatised, rain and reign  
conflating, to encompass a deluge:  
*terrorism* and its huge new cup

the world in it, brim and elbow  
viciousness and faith, and the drains  
that sluice our rubbish into the seas  
landing everything again and again  
back into our mouths, back *home*  
back *here*—the tourism  
of an *economic necessity*

is it cowardice to want  
to contaminate nothing?  
I'd sew into your first pocket  
a benison for the journey  
whose boat both day and night  
pyre and hope, leaky, historical  
is heading always for land'

## focal geology (1)

*this the year I thought to have found it and have not*  
who would begin at the heart? who at the ear, the tongue?

ants come to forage and carry off nothing  
it behaves like a river  
sluicing off each leaf, each finger clinging

yesterday it dislodged a breast, today an eye  
it drinks no milk and is blind  
yet still it lies here listening

to voices of unbearable sentiment  
singing of O home of the dream I lost

tomorrow more will come  
trying to touch its eyes with their own  
what can it say that it has not already said?

*be at peace in your mouth*  
except that it has no voice, that it has lain

here infinitely to promote no proof  
flowers keep appearing at the boundary  
I named it once after one of the dead

*this the year I thought to have found it and have not*

## focal geology (2)

*instructions for engaging with a site.*

which makes what sense on a pizza night's  
dark prowling of cars slewed and stopped  
by an escaped deer's graceful trot, tangle

of headlights, tango of engines, deer, hot  
fuel, fuelled blood, strange antlers

how they are calm: picture *disdain*  
high-held against the hungry monies  
moaning in the pockets

—sweep of the wild eye (panic *could* be building)  
the abated klaxons, something being paid for

how will you tell of this later? the cold night  
trapped in a swirl vapour, breath,  
exhausts, animal, drivers, cars, each

an introduced and the low mountain  
years before cut through to make this crash

perhaps you will speak of tariffs  
as the boundaries we pay  
for having crossed—            does only

the tilted mind write rush poetry  
as if whatever lives must utter itself swiftly  
from where it stands on thixotropic clay

everywhere feet dying in mud  
everywhere hands

in help or pushing them under,  
the accident eyes, the shine of smashed glass  
which inform us we are here, in heightened

air, our nebulae faces blue and orbital  
in a condition of being planetary

the particular makers of an atmosphere



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