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Land whisperings: Poems and palimpsests

Glen Phillips
Edith Cowan University

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Professor Glen Phillips, born in the remote goldmining town of Southern Cross, Western Australia, is an internationally published and translated poet— 30 poetry collections, as well as short fiction and non-fiction works, since the 1960s. Currently he is writing a trilogy of historic novellas set in China and Australia (1930-2010). Glen is Director of the *International Centre for Landscape and Language* at Edith Cowan University. His latest poetry collections are *Gold in Granite* translated by Han Zhulin, published by Harbin Engineering University Press (2014) and *The Secret of Love* (ICLL, 2014). Glen's PhD was entitled *Land Whisperings and a Poetics of Newplace and Birthplace* and the majority of the poems in this volume formed part of his PhD work..



LAND WHISPERINGS

LAND WHISPERINGS

GLEN PHILLIPS

POEMS & PALIMPSESTS

Glen Phillips

ICLL

These are poems of an endless return to place as a way of re-discovering the endlessness of place... of life, of dreams, of writing itself... deeply, intelligently, this is ecological art.

Dr Patrick West, *Deakin University*

A fascinating collation of creative work... parts of the poetry manuscript are masterpieces. The poems in this collection have been superbly chosen.

Professor John Kinsella, University of W.A.



Glen Phillips Born 1936 in Southern Cross, Western Australia and educated in country schools and Perth Modern School, he graduated from UWA with First Class honours in Education and MEd (1968) and gained a PhD from Edith Cowan University in 2007. Glen taught English for more than 50 years in CAEs and universities. An Honorary Professor at ECU he is Director of its International Centre for Landscape and Language. Thirty editions of his poems exist. He is published in 25 anthologies and many national and international journals. A recent bilingual book of poetry is *Gold in Granite* (2014, Harbin EUP). (100 words)

Phillips' poems are marvellously effective, international standard works of art. In many cases the writing is weepingly beautiful—Dr Patrick West, Deakin University

A fascinating collation of creative work...parts of the poetry manuscript are masterpieces—John Kinsella

GLEN PHILLIPS

THE MOON BELONGS TO NO ONE



LAND WHISPERINGS

POEMS and PALIMPSESTS

Glen Phillips

2014

International Centre for Landscape and Language Press, ECU

Edited with Introduction by Peter Bibby

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Land Whisperings: Poems & Palimpsests

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These poems formed part of 'Land Whisperings and a Poetics of Newplace and Birthplace' in my PhD (Writing), 2006. Sincere thanks are hereby made for the editorial assistance of Peter Bibby and critical comments by Professor Andrew Taylor, Professor John Kinsella, Dr Patrick West and the late Anne Born; also, for kind support from my many Chinese friends and from ECU's CREATEC research institute...Glen Phillips



Leaning Tree at Greenough

Sketch, Glen Phillips

CONTENTS

From: *Fire, Ash and Palimpsest*

The Moon Belongs to No One	11
I'll Tell Her Now	12
From 'Four Sonnets for Richard Waldendorp'	
No. IV	13
Song for a Girl	14
Long March	15
We Weep to See	17
In the Hollow of the Land III	19
Summer Torrents	20
Drought Time: Building Bush Fences	21
Waiting for Shearwaters	22

From: *Shanghai Suite and all that Jazz*

Shanghai and all that Jazz	25
Waiting at the Peace Hotel	26
Waking at Night in Jungong Lu	27
Expressing Lane	28
The Courtesan	29
The Woman River	31
Caged Birds	32
Melon Sellers	33
By Bubbling Well Road	34
Getting Out on the Wrong Floor	35

From: *Singing Granites*

Rock Picnics	37
Scrub Cities	38
Granitic Vertebrae	41
Sharing	42
Dual Flight	44
My Windows	45
Ant Nests	51
Visitants	53
Horizontality on Dartmoor	54
Visiting Gnammas on the Bullfinch Road	56

Acknowledgments

Some poems in this collection have been published previously in *A Shanghai Suite*, *Singing Granites*, *Spring Burning*, *The Woman River*, *A Show of Colours* and *Dryandra Dreaming*.

INTRODUCTION

Wherever the poet goes he takes his sensibility with him and in Glen Phillips' orbital working life the quality of that perception has been tested on three continents. Poems record this unlikely journey of the soul, one that his outback dwelling parents could not have suspected for their son, who was born of Goldfields hardship and Spartan expectations in Southern Cross in 1936 and later lived in the southern Wheatland in lean post-war years. This was when so much that was to become for us the dynamic Australia slept like a crop in the ground awaiting rain and the efforts of many still untested immigrants in what was their new continent and one which most needed understanding. Still does, is the message of certain alarms and temperatures taken in this poet's poems, though the medium is as like to be birdwatcher on a southern shore as a bauxite mine project stripping away for the bottom line beyond the cover of the foothills it threatens.

Everything in Glen Phillips' early world had to cannily survive on a slim regime exemplified by the exhausted soil. Had the humans exhausted it in two and a half generations? Well, they had not helped. They cleared. This was one thing they were truly excited about and called it Taming the Land. They cleared and cleared, as the poet records, looking with pathos at what was left, growing up with what was left. Wheatland fragrance and harvest bounty not to be forgotten, nor the cost. Perhaps it's a hunger for the Super of a more sensitive experience of place that has made him a traveller subsequently.

It is these formative years in an extraordinary yet spare and already suffering landscape, with the courage essential to its inhabitants, that have given this poet a sense of pared beauty and it never leaves him as a reference point (one might say a love). It makes him equal

to any subject, and after a time of steeping in it, to any social milieu. This is beauty where it is most unexpected, and with it an acute awareness of loss and attrition, though there's much of the human comedy in this collection. In Italy for him the landscape can make jokes, in China the people.

It's clearly stated here in a poem such as 'My Windows' (find it if you will) that a lively curiosity arose out of childhood often spent at the edge of a salt lake. Now that is not, in the European sense we still have, a pretty lake. It has a fringe of ominously dead trunks and limbs. What it distils is a restless and fearless appraisal, still a wonder, like the prospect of a climb on to the lowliest granite tor, majestic in a land of penepain. This becomes in another poem, 'In the Hollow of the Land', the ice-age history of a rock. No small rock, a whole formation that, it happens, is beloved of tourists. But here we learn about that ice. Events more terrifyingly distant and transformative, when all water was that kind of frozen rock and the land under some kilometre thickness of it, a pre-life occupation of this Our Landscape for a term difficult to imagine; and possibly without the scintilla of a cell of existence. Yet that is what made the tor a tourist magnet, that and other familiar yet not so familiar elements, I leave you to discover.

The above poem speaks for eons, as others speak for the present and though they seem on one hand to relegate humanity to complete insignificance yet there is something exalting and of course human in the truth. Like the Casuarinas in the outback singing, the plunge of paddles into a Chinese 'Woman River' or the sprawling new suburbs of a megalopolis that have usurped an idyll in 'Bubbling Well Road', as the name alone continues to signify. Familiar changes. Yet few Australians could wake up in a Shanghai hotel room and describe the life of a city at night in China with such relaxed urbanity—and acute pathos for something its inhabitants have lost, however

stoic their adjustment. This is not only societal, but personal— ‘Melon Sellers’, it is not the overlooked gift of fruit that stings but something only memory acknowledges, desire. This is sublime understatement, and like the layered city talk or country sooth in this work, a profound comment on human existence—it’s a long road from Southern Cross and Lake Grace. Enjoy.

Peter Bibby

From Fire, Ash and Palimpsest

THE MOON BELONGS TO NO ONE

Some claim the moon sends specially
to them their very own moonbeams
to shine into their eye or throw warm gules
on Madeline's fair breast, as the poet
put it. On the other hand, I claim,
the moon belongs to no one.

The lost airman, after midnight, dragging
himself and the hanging shrouds of his
torn parachute as well as the shattered legs
that broke his fall, may look up at this moon
through thin canopy of desert mallee
and think, out here, a hundred mile from
anywhere, he has special claim to that
cold sphere's blazing grace. But I claim
the moon belongs to no one.

Therefore in sharing on distant streets
in distant continents as we make our
separate ways home to narrow beds,
in sharing this same moon to light our way
haven't we claim she shines for us?
And yet we know as we draw breath
the moon belongs to no one.

I'LL TELL HER NOW: 1914-18
(A Palimpsest for James, son of Cath and Bert)

“Yes, I’ll tell her!” His face paled slowly
as the train rattled on to the sea,
leaving behind vast scrubland that reaches
out to reef gold and red dust swirling free.
Her hand grasped his.

Both stared into blackness
outside the carriage window. Australian night
closed on the couple and their wakening
bud of flesh, their changeling. Then the light
of stations showed briefly. In dying darkness
faces met one more time, as in a forest dim.

Five years had seen strange slow dawning
of their love. In stark mine office under giant
poppet-head she’d come, miles from ocean
beach and harbour mouth, where sea mist
rises at dusk. Past farms and quartz ridges
her train had crawled.

But later, when he kissed
her at the dance-hall, nightmares vanished,
at least until sudden news was heard—
his daughter, gravely ill at home. He wavered
then. It seemed a deeper conscience stirred.
Would he leave her? Love become vapour
lost in the desert’s furnace heat?

His breast

had heaved, line of mouth hard, eyes darting
until turning to her, new with child. "Our nest
is made, "I'll tell her now." The reed-beds
by the speeding train became a sallow gray
but westward, over the river, a crimson
sky flared. Closer they leaned at closing
of the day.

THE WARREN WEEPS

(From: FOUR IRREGULAR SONNETS FOR
RICHARD WALDENDORP)

These wide white thighs of sand are parted here
so the acrid river's stream can disperse
into the Southern Ocean's chilling clear
waters, where sperm and humpback linger,
nurse
new calves, grow strong enough, turn south,
head
towards pack ice and grey storm waves
with spindrift and fume flying—plankton their
bread
as someone once said. A mission that saves
a beached school roused people. In a band

volunteers came over the sand dunes seeking
blistered dark mounds that lay on the land
in a shallow rush of surf. And life leaking
undone in crushed lungs, skin had turned grey
but they laved and nursed and got them away.

SONG FOR A GIRL

(a palimpsest for John Dryden)

Young I am walking in an orchard
of maturing fruits and see a lover yield.
How to keep these images of green shade?
I believe this taught me when to feign.

Take me from these dry wheatlands
to forest where trees grow young and true
till I need recall no more
those bodies jerk in dust; roll of eyes.

Stay not till knuckles ring hollow on
the water tank's lowest rungs and to betray
he that has sired you and your kin;
to stay longer would be to deceive the rest.

Could I find fresh water to replace
dust-brimmed teacups? And full of truth,
brisk, and of sound mind and body,
shed the mire of years; again to be fifteen?

LONG MARCH HOME SESTINA

Who the hell back then would have thought
that I could have traced a path all this way
from the sullen mullock mounds, perils
of half-filled mine shafts, creaking derelict
poppet heads craning high over a quartz
crushed hill rising among Yilgarn grey-green

savannah? My mother was raised in green
pastures of Avon River's winding ways,
so surely not. My father? A derelict
family when his Welsh Da left the quartz
gold reef of Gondwanaland with the thought
of richer tin mining among jungle perils.

And instead, now I face professorial perils
in a China classroom, or inspect derelict
Welsh mining towns crouched in the green
mists, finger family gravestones. No thought
there of new factories—crystals of quartz
in Jianguo where they've lost the Taoist Way.

Or bursting through snowbanks on my way
to Valtellina peaks rising above green
apple orchards. And who'd have thought
I'd trudge Tuscan roads? No chipped quartz
this time, but marble scree amid perils
of Michelangelo's quarries, now derelict.

That I conversed in tongues all derelict
of meaning to my father or mother, of perils
at Bologna Station bombed, or quartz
carvings smashed by Red Guards on the way
to win over dynasties of cultured thought;
strange my voice turns from red to green.

And so, landscape a solace, I sought green
shades of my homeland once again, my way
back to gold-bearing greenstone of derelict
mining sites, the scars of greed and perils
of fallen stopes, miners entombed in quartz
or lungs dusted. Ma, who'd have thought?

For me, such perils began on ridge of quartz
with birth thoughts of pain among derelict
desert trees, grey-green. Yet it is my way.

WE WEEP TO SEE

(A palimpsest for JHP: revisiting the Old Bill)

I wandered into the Railway Hotel's front bar.
It was three o'clock on a weekday. The air
that floats heavily at this time of the afternoon
lingered over beer mats, stained jarrah wood.

When all is said and done, what're we here for?
I said that to the barman, Steve. But just then
a host of Japanese tourists burst in, cameras
swinging, plimsoles squeaking. The bus stood
beside the lake. Steve couldn't even answer me,
so busy drawing beers and searching for ice.

Fluttering, darting about, their tour guide,
tried to explain what each desired while I just
leaned on my elbow, ears full of babble of their
baffling tongue. I thought to myself, it's like
when you walk past bee hives. With a wave
and a twinkle in his eye, Steve spoke to me over
bobbing heads: How's this, boyo? Better I serve
'em here than when they stretched that railway
towards Burma. At least this time It's me
making a buck! I'd had enough. Went along
the parquetry past them, out into the street.

Tar road heat hit me as the easterly blew
ten thousand head of wild oats in devil dance.

I pulled my bike from shade of york gums
tossing their heads in that breeze. It could turn
to a willy-willy in an instant, launch scrap
paper, whip the waves up over the salt lakes.

I threw a leg across the saddle and pushed that
ancient grid til I out did myself, past Co-op
and Roads Board towards my little spot,
the 'jwb & i'¹ by the creek. A poet once said,
'How is it that you live and what is it you do?'
Well, my answer in such a case would be,
'Yet still I persevere.' Entering my gate,
propping Malvern Star on a post. I gazed
at my vegie patch, now pretty dry, and said,
what wealth you gave me all of winter
and spring! True I'd stripped vines of beans
for oft my garden seemed to grow obsessed,
as if to bury me in plenitude of sprout, leaf
and tuber. In vacant lots you see this frenzy
with weeds that can't abide a square foot of
bare ground. Flashing their instincts—
all those stomata reckless to the sun.

¹ Old WA real estate descriptive jargon for a bungalow
constructed of jarrah weatherboards with a corrugated iron
roof.

IN THE HOLLOW OF THE LAND (a palimpsest for Viv's boy)

This is the story of Yorkrakine Rock in
the dead land of salt scalded farms.
This is the story of a ruined house among
cactus effigies to decayed dreams. In the
land here the stone is signature to glacial aeons.
Images—half mile of sheet ice grinding granite
These lovers were sheet ice and stone,
receive each other's straining embrace, melt as
the supplication of this shaping of Gondwana.

A dead man's country, now. You reach a
hand under warped veranda boards and see
the twinkle of something in the dust. Relic
of a fading star, battered pocket watch,
unstrung.

Wherever granites nudge above wheat-lands,
In death's delay, the salt creeps slowly up creek-
beds.
Other kingdoms thrive on sweet flood-plains
waking to spring rains, benign household gods.

Alone at hour night's south wind is waning.
We're watchful but at peace on igneous shield,
trembling with the sheoak, kunzia, tamma bush;
tenderness shared with spider, wheeling plover.

Lips that'd utter curse in killing fields, now take
kiss of dawn wind. Deep brows of riven
rockform prayers untuned by idle chatter. Eyes
lift
to broken stone of this worn enduring form.

SUMMER TORRENTS

(Spinedi, Lombardy 1980, a Settina)

Plunge ankle-deep in the clear
streams across alpine-chilled stone;
delicately you step past
wine-dark berry barbs, taste wine
past caring; then delicate
stone steps lead down to more streams:
clear as ever, torrents plunge.

DROUGHT TIME: BUILDING BUSH FENCES

(Apologies to John Kinsella for the palimpsest upon his poem '*The Frozen Sea*')

Having to cut fence-posts to size
was as big a task as I'd want. Later we'd peel
away light-coloured sapwood, telling ourselves
that darkness is heart-wood, dense as ice;
excepting the jam-trees' scent of raspberries.
Seemed that with the frosts, I had thought ice
to be a clear sign the logs'd split true; misted
transparency of early morning assured from
memory's break of season. There was none;
other than odd cool days. And I'd come to fear
I could still cut each week's quota. The thought
that some day I'd fail plagued me. Contract near
an end, but what next? Winter with no water?

WAITING FOR SHEARWATERS

(Strahan, January 2000)

From the dunes the sun
was free-falling into dark
rush of the sea. Winds
wild from the west cuffed
wave-tops, hounded countless
creaming crests and drops.

North and south the sand
stretched wet and flat as spread
field notebook pages. Crowd stood
or sat in wait on the dunes
walkway, flimsy gallery of wood.
Intent we watched, as if soothsayers,
telling the cast of runes.

We could see before this roaring
west wind a small yacht
that ran with slip of canvas,
no more than a black jot
in the fading twilight. The sea,
angry and grey, bruised that boat's
haphazard passage to where
a safe inlet bided patiently.

Back and forth we searched
those lowering cloud-filled skies,
our upturned faces, craning ears
awaited first signalling cries,
almost a second coming.
But the shadows falsely sent
and darker than darkness
seemed the first fluttering intent.

Then another and another. Yes,
one more swooped like some
storm-tugged twisting kite
turning on humming string,
skimming in circles tight.
They were scanning it seemed
wind-blown tussocks of grass,
searching for secret signals
in each wild wheeling pass.

We knew that in burrows warm
nestlings of these hero seafarer
birds waited for their tireless
storm-driven parents. Oh to be bearer
of such bounty to our own flock.

From

Shanghai Suite & All That Jazz

SHANGHAI AND ALL THAT JAZZ

On tour. It's Shanghai tonight, they say.
The little band of travellers, tourists
from Au Da Li Ya step heavily down
from their lumbering bus in Nanjing Lu
and receive brass keys to colonially
spacious rooms in what they now call
Peace Hotel, the Bund a few steps
away. Here many a famed westerner's
form reclined thankfully on laundered
sheets in Sassoon's halcyon days; when
Coward wrote 'Private Lives' and Shaw
or Chaplin savoured an admiring glance.

But after supper our tour leaders declared
we'd be entertained in the famed Jazz Bar
by legend's ancient snazzy jazz band,
still thumping 'Lazy River' and 'Ye Shanghai'.
So we tapped a toe with a glass of Qingdao beer
in hand. Found anything but peace til 2 am.
After all, it was 'Crippled Sassoon' who
made sure the Bank of China remained
twelve centimetres lower than the Peace Hotel.

WAITING AT THE PEACE HOTEL

Sassoon's Mansions in Nanjing Road East was really for Victor's penthouse on top of his private hotel. Those were the days.

Latterly, when the Party had finished erasing the last tastes of shame for those years of infamy and foreign occupation, they renamed it with fine irony, perhaps, the Peace Hotel.

Tourists could come to its threadbare opulence, sleep as Coward had, in its vaulted guest rooms, dine in the oiled teak banquet hall. Or take time even to this day to hear play the old-time jazz performers, still tinkling keys, thrumming strings or warbling saxophone notes.

Enough, I'm standing here now next to the doorman in uniform by his revolving door, watching the taxis come and go and flag-led tourist hordes back from Bund or Pearl Tower or the People's Park. Meanwhile I look at my watch and await peace for my feet at last.

WAKING AT NIGHT IN JUNGONG LU

It was ever a disturbed sleep:
ships moaning somewhere
up the foggy Huangpu; a freight
train shuffling rakes of trucks;
the hee-haw of an ambulance
or the rising scream of police pursuit.

A chair leg shrieks across laid tiles.
Someone is coughing in the smoke
of a post midnight cigarette,
a lorry batters iron manhole lids
in the comatose street. Then
a door betrays a muffled
departure, a walker in the road
hums a sad song. There is one
brief cry. Or was it a shout?

Only dogs do not bark in this night
nor cocks crow in the small hours.
Creaks of a bed above or below
as a body turns towards the wall.
Or was it mine? Sleep creeps back in.

EXPRESSING LANE (eight items only)

Picture a shiny supermarket
in a Shanghai suburb's street
amid rubble of exploits now
long past and new fervour
of blossoms in cement and steel.
Still the many melon sellers
and the trinket men crowd
the old footpath of puddles
leading to the grand new-paved
concourse to take-away spoils.

Inside the aisles tremble
with glittering trolley loads
of packaged noodles, tins
of beans and bamboo shoots,
sauce bottles, clothes pegs, sweets.
I fast-forward. I dart from
row to row, my chariot stacked
and stashed and ready to go.

My bee-line to the check-out
checked I veer right to a queue
that looks the shortest, below
a bilingual sign that I choose
to ignore for the nonce, replete
with my victory over this
temple to consumption's speed.

A tall gent taps me on the shoulder,
points to the sign I wouldn't read
and says in perfect English, 'Chum,
can't you read? It says
eight items only, savvy?'
I search hastily for a tongue
to pretend I'm Spanish, French
or a Lithuanian. And sheepish
go through, while the whole queue
stands and stares and the lass
on the till registers my error
without the blink of an eye.

BRUSH STROKES FOR THE COURTESAN

How to bear the sadness?

She lights more joss sticks.

Her lord is scraping
his ink block,
readying for more powerful
strokes.

His calligraphy
re-scribes Li Bai.

She
knows
the eight strokes,
the agile brush.

Despite
his years of care
he would
write her epitaph
with resolute touch.

Yet her heart
beats on stubbornly,
like the scrape scrape
of the inkstone
and the lash
of the brush.

THE WOMAN RIVER (At the Dragon Boat Festival)

I remember the dragon boats
on the river, the detonations
of fireworks, the beating drums.
It was tribal. It was like war
as the sweating boatcrews strove
to defeat each other on that dark
green glittering trench between
festive phalanxes on the banks.

And after each stretch of river
traversed, amid the fierce thunder,
then on a stroke the glistening
rowers rose as one from their
seats and turned. Then facing
the other way crouched and dug
deep their stiff paddles once more.
Eyes fixed ahead in victory trance.

There are moments in all lives
when the dragon's breathing fire
catches in our own throats. Bodies
are narrow boats on festive streams
and the rower plunges each deep
stroke. Eyes are fixed to where
the shine on the river's form
dazzles and then the dragon roars.

CAGED BIRDS ARE FAVOURED BY OLD MEN

It is true old men discover
a love of keeping pets; singing birds
to carry about suspended in
their cages of bamboo; to bill
and coo, to chirp or sing lustily.

Old men totter to meet in morning
or afternoon, proud of birdsong
pleased with plumage, bright beaks,
beady eyes, the flutter of little wings.
They bring them to their gatherings
of green jars of tea and melon seeds.

In stacked cages proud possessions
strut on perches and flutter feathers,
cock a head askance to show
the flecked white of beady eyes.

Why do old men want to do this?
Have they discovered only now
a last kind of love? Found a way
to keep love forever perched
on a swing, yet waiting for the day
their master's withered hand
at last will set love free?

MELON SELLERS

I have bought you melons
she said. I hope you like
them. Indeed, for she was
a mother even then. On
the street red-cheeked country
women hauling barrows showed
their rosy apples, muscular hands
of bananas, sloe-eyed grapes.

But she had chosen from them
these four small melons. I regret
I did not eat them. But I
had no want of melons then.

BY BUBBLING WELL ROAD

If you look into this old Yangpu River
where it flows past wharf and pier,
past creek and bridge and tower,
you see in its darkness the floating weeds
the murk of muddied lanes and streets,
the spent humours of these multitudes
who have endured dynasties on these banks.

The delta's drainage meets the ocean's tides
and the outflow is all the ends of lives.
Nearby waits the great Yangtse's flood
that spends its strength through highland
and gorge, tumbling from distant tributaries.

When morning's eastward paleness lights
the pall over all these sprawling suburbs,
I think of fresh mountain streams that plunge
among the rocks and have four thousand
Yangtse miles to run. Such young torrents
have no patience for the last slack reaches
of an indolent river. Darkened waters resist
embraces of open seas; measure time's
vast stretches which pass swiftly and forever.

GETTING OUT
WRONG

Lost in thought
you sure can
step right out
of a lift you
expect to go
straight down
to the ground
floor. Only it
has stopped
for someone
else to get in.
Looks stupid
when it dis-
appears and
leaves you 9
floors above
ground. However, should you happen

ON THE
FLOOR

no less! Yes!
is comrade step
word for that
friend? The
call that, my
What do you
better than you.
you're going
to know where
always seem
inside. They
haul you back
your lapel and
souls will grab
in a lift, kindly
to be in China

From

Singing Granites

ROCK PICNICS

were prolific in york and salmon gum
woodland of midwest wheat farm swales.

Rock picnics brought you to high places
above bleaching late spring pastures and crops

where weathered tors stood Easter Island-like
and rock dragons scampered among scree.

Rock picnics were for Sunday schools, or
'sports day' for little one-teacher schools or

just a social club on a wildflower-picking stroll.
The groves of singing casuarinas saw it all;

and elders stiffly measured out the fifty yards
with knotted binder twine for the finish line.

On your marks! A piggyback race across space,
tussocky, rabbit-holed, littered with granite
shards.

Staggering with the school bully on my back
I stepped in the hidden rabbit hole and fell flat.

They said, 'It's only a ricked knee. It'll pass.'
I did not see then the mark of granite there;

but my kneecap bruised to a crescent shape
of stone, when I went home. And still I limp.

SCRUB CITIES:

(Remembering *Between Wodjil and Tor*)

This anti-city
is dreaming
in insect hum
and rustle of feet
over leaf litter
along ant trails;
in the catacombs
of termite mounds
in call of currawong
and flicker of bronzewing;

In pulse of stone
on stone, diorite
and schist, mica
felspar and quartz
and crusts of laterite;
rocks speaking to rocks;

In straps of mallet
and mallee and wandoo
that swing from bough
and trunk. In the
fingering twigs under
leaf crowns, winds
whisper narratives
of remembered storms;

In farming energies
distant, persistent
a hundred years
or more of imprint
images shaping sere
rectangles, wedges
of remnant woodlands
once free-range foraging
for their tammars,
woylies, euros and wallabies;
brush-tail possums
and skitter of numbats.

Later the noise of engines
joined these other ghosts.
Blackened steam barrels
on steel wheels hauled power
of multiples of horses
in a box of coal lumps
or cords of cut wood.
Tall smoke stacks thundered

in time with whirr
of flywheel, hiss of driven
piston and flapping belt;

And as the chaff was bagged
or plump sheaves winnowed,
windmills creaked and spun.
Then there were draught horses
snuffling in nosebags, stamping
even in dead of night;
and creak of harnesses
clank of trace chains,
rattle of the mouldboard plough;

In whine of separator
as the cream poured into
the bowl, in the one-lunged
Lister pounding at night
in the engine-house behind
the workman's bothy;
or at shearing time
the Wolseley chugging on
and combs whizzing in the cutters
as a shearer yanks down
on the wire. Generations
of workers are shadows
haunting the boards of sheds;

In deserted farm gardens
spiders are busy creating
lines of text spun upon
these lands. And as
they re-read assiduously with
finger tips their own braille history
of granite monoliths and swales,
saltmarsh and sand-ridge
the infinite numbers
of plant species, mosses, lichens,
and ancient animal life,
we other travellers haunt
the twilight of our lesser texts.

GRANITIC VERTEBRAE

'The weight of granite will damage vertebrae'

John Kinsella

How to defy the universe
can begin with gravity.
You find a boulder, crowbar
it out of the earth to set
it as the base of your wall.

First align your feet to meet
the centre of this stone globe,
tense your calves and lock both knees
for a start. The thighs then must

take the strain as you stoop, grasp
the rock in an act of love
for granite; keep your back straight
and hope your Pisan tower
of stacked up chairs won't totter.

It is now you may lie back
and think of your queen, or claim
good fences make good vertebrae.

SHARING

(for L.P.)

Suffering: it is a real woman's task
to take finally the harder road
while someone listens to the *pipa'*
far, far away from that music's home.
They say such tunes are food for love.
But what sustenance is this? When
thousand after thousand ocean miles
drown out the singing of plucked strings
with sea's rough work of waves and howl
of driven salt winds across the crests.

After the song has ended you walk
on broken paths in the desert silence.
Over granite rocks air shimmers as heat
rises. Strange mirages show plates

of darkness like the shapes of demons,
dragons, avenging spirits of torment.

But the light changes over the land
and rain showers follow. Then in
warm sun brilliant desert flowers bloom.

¹ Pipa is sometimes called the Chinese lute.

DUAL FLIGHT

Settina at Yorkrakine Rock, 2001

Light shows two hawks in high flight
duelling above dawn's rock pool.
Deep down in stone fissures creep
roots of kunzeas. Each root
creeps towards water. A deep
pool this time hosts the duelling
flight of white moths, seeking light.

MY WINDOWS

You have, all of you, brought life to me
 through your windows
showing me your landscapes, gifts held up
 for me to view
to share: vision from your window,
 gardens you have tended
well, your pride; so I might stand looking
 out at landscapes
full of your desired colours, family and
 ancestry, your
many home towns, your coffee cups,
 the fine brown mole
on your left hip, your favourite books.
 Even your hand quick
on the gear lever, dab on the brakes:
 'My quick reactions
keep me safe,' you said. And when
 you smiled after tears
I did not want to leave your window,
 your fervid landscape
with its green leafiness. Rain smoking
 on hot streets, blue haze
from hawkers' aromatic stands,
 the jungle's oily smells
as we jogged dirt tracks by the reservoir.

Windows that showed me so many
 other worlds than mine;
the time we walked beach sands, arm
 in arm, and you tried
to peer through a blowing haze
 of sand and salt-sea spray
to where the trodden trail of your
 next year's struggle led.
Another time among burnt black boles
 of scarp-land scrub
you followed the river's dwindling pools,
 each green window
among darker green reeds and paperbarks.
 Or on a mountain drawn
close to me, it seemed, because you knew
 it was my birthright landscape.

Meanwhile away among snowy peaks
 which framed the rows
of growing vines, patchwork sloping meadows
 and hairline of distant
growth of chestnut and fir, I opened October
 autumn casements wide
and breathed air which first filled your
 lungs a score and twelve
years before. Across an alpine torrent's
 stone-choked bed, we
came to shaded grove on the stream's bank.
 And in the thickest part
while a hunter whistled at his dog in the
 distance, and wild berries

stained your outspread skirts, we laboured
well with young love's will.

You held firm my out-reached hand
as we slipped to sleep,
the night's journey shadowed with travails
of our separate ways.
Came morning, with its summer fume of bees
over flowered meadows —
marguerites and poppies and the cornflower's
sky-blue blooms — and so
we travelled south again to olives, green beads
on their outstretched
sprigs of peace. It seemed the very place
to make farewells.

Each day you came to me. Work brought you
but the spring's early
sea-wind through the window shook the soft
down on your resting arm.
Later I took it in mine as we paced lake-side
where black swans grazed
the green lawns, and we gazed out over wind-
ruffled waters to fine
city towers that seemed to aspire to double
their images in blue tints
of the shallow reaches. At last alone at
evening, in lamp's yellow
with three fingers delicately held in your

waistband, you called me
urgently to spirited flesh.

A table strewn with books one summer
set beneath a window sill
where flimsy curtain flicks in fitful breeze.
As you lean forward
reaching for the furthest volume, you mean
me, perhaps, to see
paleness of perspiring skin after your long walk.
Then you turn to me
smiling and our chatter goes on, of Paris,
your hopes of writing
and of study overseas. It seems you seek
freedom
in measure that kinsfolk
would surely warn against. Much later your
letters
tell of your ruse to cycle
in the autumn rains, so that the drenching
showers
will disguise your
sorrows, also streaming from your eyes.

They call lengthwise photos *landscapes*
as opposed to *portraits*;
so when we drive arrow-straight roads
into salmon-gum country,
eyes bulge like a nervous rabbit who vainly
tries to scan for wedgetails

coming out of the sun behind him as if
fighter-planes dive screaming
from left and right in peripheral vision.
What do we drivers see?
Side windows of our car unwind both pictures
in twin dimensions.
Up close fencelines follow you margined
with two sad strips
of the land's ancient burning bush. We know
little of each plant's
survival. (As fabulous voyagers, we can't see
millennia of secrets still preserved
in these fragile ribbons that persist.)
Further out and wheeling away
across bleached paddocks, are rings of york
or salmon gums that circle
farm dams or mark erratic creeks. And further
again, dark uncleared hills
that also appear to wheel in some greater circle,
measured slow against racing
roadside verges, so they seem even to move
in contra way. You sit
beside me intent, watching nose of the car
crest another climb
and dip down towards salt-wash lowlands, dark
with sedge and samphire.
And you're waiting to see the vaunted shape
of granite hollowed like an ocean
wave. This stone, more massive than
any sculptor ever chanced
hand to fashion, forces us to face eastward,
to gaze out over

remnant miles of once vast Gondwanaland.
For aeons levelled
by sculpting genius of some half-mile thickness
of a Permian glacier's
chisel blade. So, as we both stare out,
standing close on
that hewn megalith, I think I feel ghost chill
of an ice-borne wind
they say blew this great stone into a rising wave.

After you had wandered the coalmine town
chatting to phthisic
miners in hotels and local history club
we travelled back the jarrah
way through sombre forest where new sounds
of machines might reveal
scarp scraped for insatiate bauxite mines,
hidden well from casual
tourist eyes. We saw no sign but sped on a long
trail back. Until tired
we pulled in to pause at a roadside pub
in a sleepy hamlet
where only a dozen townsfolk stirred.
Over a drink or two
I chanced to peer out the squared window
to see rakes of ore trucks
shunting down the new line from the hills
to where refinery
smoked its stack over the once clean farmlands.
You broke into my reverie, and I
was happy then that you had the power

to bring me back to talk of
another land where Grasmere, Keswick stand.
So, years later, listening
to Mahler's choral symphony under towering
stained glass of Ely I wondered
had you some mystery force to draw
me through another sort
of window back to haunts of certain ancestors
amid Norfolk marshlands
in shadow of carved sandstone
and exalted casements
kingdom of gown and book?

You have, all of you, brought me
some way, then, toward
these window-seats to landscapes where I write
letter after letter home.

ANT NESTS

A backyard child I used to see
ants bring up to the surface
these small fragments of spinifex
or grass, little grains of quartz.

They lay warming in our wheatbelt sun
most of the day until shadows

of mort and kolyung crept across
cooling red dirt to annular nests

that were aureoles among twig
detritus. Sure enough then
with restless questing strength
first one then another black body

climbed out, twitching antennae
to take a heated stone grain, chip of leaf
down under into blue-black gloom
where egg babies waited to be warmed.

Years roll on. Each day I still
scavenge my images, brought
one by one into the sun's light.
Maybe I can retrieve even now

warmth they once held for us,
when blood on fire seemed to rise
in arteries enough to radiate

VISITANTS

To My Wheatfields, Salt Lakes and Salmon Gums

If you were to join me here
in my country, breathing
quietly aromatic oils
of eucalypt and salt bush
on the old bush tracks, goldfields treks,
the old sandalwood trails
the old songlines
of my stolen country!

If you were here
by me in my country
sighting along my arm
letting the yellow-gold
and old green enter
your eyesockets, pass through
the shadowy aisles
to merge with your own country!

If you were here
I would show the way
I have taken through
sixty summers and winters,
of footsteps in the litter
of bark strippings, the shed leaf debris
in the powdery red dust.
And footsteps wet, on glittering
granite domes in a freezing wind.

If you were here
I would show you those ways
through wheatfields, saltlakes
and salmon gums to my country.

HORIZONTALITY ON DARTMOOR

(for Anne Born)

it was a bitter wind with rain
among stone circles of verticality
and tussocks bent low, flattened
along sight lines of stone rows
[the email said dear anne]

it was a white gelid fog
upcurling there through barred gates
and around lintel, buttress and arch;
swirling between lichen spotted
headstones, pointing accusations
[the email said dear anne]

above were the masked, starred
heavens, the same constellations
hidden from prisoners taken
from bonaparte's armies. like
captives of nazis, they made

their own graves of the granite
[the email said dear anne]

so they battered blocks of gray stone
into walls and yards and cells,
spreading this granite cancer
over the swampy moors under
the lowering dome, that extruded
its igneous mushroom cloud
[the email said dear anne]

but the dark stars were often hid
from those blue-daubed mystics,
the men who sighted along
standing stones, trying to match
solstice sunrise with a notch
in the matrix of felspar, mica, quartz
[the email said dear anne]

VISITING GNAMMAS ON THE BULLFINCH ROAD

The sign said 'Gnamma Holes'
but we knew *gnamma* meant holes
anyway. Through the tammar thicket
and loose-limbed gimlet scrub we pushed
to a cleared space where rock pavement
of tawny granite stretched down to a place

where gnammas indeed held cool
deepgreen water. Autumn storm rains
had refreshed so much
that a seral green meadow
lipped each precious mouth.

There was no *inselberg*, nor nubbin,
not even a castle *koppie*; no tor-like *tafoni*
or majestic waveform rock mantle to be seen.
Just sweet deep jars of sustenance
once only the Wongai knew.

And had hid them 'til brutal horsemen
forced tribal men to madness of thirst
to commit sacrilege
and bring the *djanga* here.

Now the sign on the main road
makes it all plain. Heavy of heart,
unslaked, we rejoined the road south.

A note on the palimpsests: such works are created when an existing painting or literary work is wholly or partly obliterated to allow a new work to be created upon it.

The keys to the palimpsests in this volume are as follows:
“I’ll Tell Her Now” — ‘An Australian Sunrise’ —
(Cuthbertson); “Song for a Girl” — (Dryden) from ‘Love
Triumphant’; “In the Hollow of the Land” — (T S Eliot)
‘The Hollow Men’ Part 3.



Boyagin Rock

Sketch by Glen Phillips