road trains: cattle or cables; ammonium sulphate or haulpak tyres; new cars from Korea or railway trucks; and loads of god knows what rare ores for armaments.

Through rocky range after range and boulder strewn flats and ridges freckled with spinifex we are coming at last to the end of two others who had set out at dawn like us, That was their last one, of course, last dawn over this whole sprawl of a country. Two lines scraped across bitumen to point to where the red dirt-encrusted crumpled beer can of a four-wheel-drive was flanked now by a pristine police car. No point any more even in evening shades to watch for ghostly roos.

1996

JOHN CAGE GOES OUTBACK

Metallic plink plonk of struck keys hesitates. Then runs on in unwound notes as toy piano brings back sounds of childhood in remote arid home-place where one house stands dark among mallee and saltbush on clean red dirt. A tankstand bears weight
of last winter’s rainwater. Here you can
tell that store, as you ring on rungs of iron
of that round tank with a child’s knuckles.
Like playing keyboard of a toy piano
with your hands wrong way round.
Well then, if those rungs were seasons,
years even, you’d be too young to think
that water of your life, your suite, runs out
all the way from such beginnings to the end.

2005

THEY LAUGHED WHEN I SAT DOWN TO PLAY

(Theme and Variations)

I

When you stop the car
on a sand road –
hakeas and mallees
rising head high or more
on either side of you –
noise of the silence
is sudden as a thunderstroke.

II

Stepping out of the moving stream
gives a delusion, perhaps,
that you have gained wisdom
and power. And the rest