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
of your fellows live on in dreams.
While instead, you are gifted, blessed
with second sight to perceive atoms
dancing! Or brimming of sap
in branches. Strange other humans seem
so unaware of your power to move unguessed
among them? But angels still may come
with sound and light. Maybe it’s best
you stay concealed. Go home
and greet them as if you’ve never left?
Then surge of the wild flowers’ fume
sweeps you along, alone, bereft
of the great powers you once presumed.
Foolishly you cherish memory of your priceless gift.

III

Emperors are among
those who have concealed
themselves, to know
what citizens really think.
In love we pause
between passionate
embrace, torn by doubts
that our subject’s love
matches our own servitude.
Crippled as Lear or Othello
wracked as Casaubon,
we wish for the stealth
to observe unseen,
to verify the truth no ague
of the loins can assuage.

IV

Small birds come
to a garden fountain.
They take turns, somehow
respecting each other’s
claim to sustenance
with deft decorum.
Yet now and then are moved
to plunge and fly out
in scatter of bright spray.
We see them next
high on a branch
ruffled with pleasure
stolen in this sudden flight.

V

Listening on an empty road
you hear sound
of the engine ticking. You hear
bird voices calling
each to each. Wind in the trees.
Your own blood
whispers like a distant drum. 1985