Looking for Marianne North

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Southern Cross University, Australia

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Looking for Marianne North*  

John Charles Ryan (Southern Cross University, Australia)

this grotesque burl absorbed
    you, but obsession came easily,
    propelled you to Japan, Sicily, Borneo

your portrait from Ceylon—
    a shawl-wrapped saint, cherubic
    aura and flushed cheeks framed
    by palm fronds

more restless and further
    flung you became after
    your father passed away

    your love transposed
        to pitcher-plants,
        tree-ferns, bael fruits

now the same dirt track you took
    from Pemberton jars me,
    corrugations made more extreme
    by four-wheel tyre tread

than your trundling by horse-drawn
    wagon: easel, oils and implements
    of exile in tow to paint an aberration—
a bearded gargoyle interrupting

pure ascension
  your rendering is faithful
  to forest spirits and to banksias grasping
  with light-thirsty fingertips

  by midday, septa
partition growth into gnomish faces, perfumed
  bark below and above
  shreds off in the sear

peering up unexpectedly—*Creation of Adam*,
  Michelangelo in crevices, or, at least, seraphs
  and sprites cavorting

you and I limber to the shaded
  moss-strewn side    close our eyes    cling to cool
resilience, which is a karri

which is a tree.

*Marianne North (1830–1890) was an English botanical illustrator who travelled to Southwest Australia in 1880.*