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Looking for Marianne North

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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.