

MORNING STAR TO EVENING STAR

(a trio sonata)

I

SALT GRAINS

(for Donald Stuart)

When you see the morning star across ridge
after ridge of ironstone and in between,
on lowlands of salt shallows the dark bridge
of sheoak growth, dense paper barks and lean
mallee clumps, you know you are in homeland,
can join new day where the salmon gums stand.¹

That star wanes in the western sky, the sun
throws its raw crimson rash across samphire,
saltbush and the human footprints that run
toward line of rotting fenceposts, tangled wire
in the red mud; where hieroglyphs uncouth
are tracks of Arctic terns from China's north.²

Here, after the war-to-end-all-wars, the 'dusted'³
miners were given wheat farms, since the gold
had run out in old lodes of quartz-crustled
Frasers Mine⁴. These dry-land farms they'd been sold
were healthy enough places if you were hale
and hearty, and a young hot-blooded male.
But these were men who'd share dugout and trench
at *The Nek* or *Le Somme*⁵, gassed some of them

or carrying shrapnel wounds. Still with the stench
of dead comrades in their nostrils; phlegm
in their throats as they coughed and coughed
in frosty dawns hunched over as milk frothed

in the zinc pail from the one cow they owned.
The wife boiled up for food their wheat sweepings
from the bagged sheds where she'd groaned
humping grain with her husband, her weepings
punctuated by his cough as they stretched out
at day's end on sacks, wracked with pain and doubt.

Another dry year. And she fell pregnant too,
so they walked off the property, shifted
in with her city mother; while he in queue
for the jobless waited hopefully. Drifted
to another queue, until at last found
'lift attendant'⁶ work as the years turned round.

But others stayed on—the larger farms
running enough sheep. Some went back
working underground at Frasers, out of harm's
way, perhaps. Except for choking dust, lack
of sun or fresh air—only seeing starlight
coming up after a long shift at night.
Towns tottered on and, with water supplied
for the 'goldfields scheme'⁷, even bowling greens
and public gardens were installed. But relied
on government workers, bank johnnies for means

to survive in the main. But still each day
morning and evening stars showed briefly the way

in the wheeling universe. Country folk
maybe in springtime when kunzeas⁸ bloomed
on Yorkrakine Rock⁹ drew water from the soak
and climbed to stand, arms outstretched, groomed
by the streaming wind, picnic baskets in array;
beside a rough cairn, saw hats blown away.

II

WHEAT GRAINS

(for John Kinsella)

The Great Southern¹⁰, they called it—
farm lands once the scrub was cleared,
with the best soil marked by salmon gums
or blackbutts. Still, the sandplains at first
produced well, especially when winter storms
blowing over the great granite outcrops drenched
newly-seeded ground, leaned the telegraph posts
and filled long lakebeds with shimmering water.
So then, standing on the veranda at evening,
a break in the clouds letting the weak sun
send gold shafts to suffuse dryandra¹¹ groves,
the ranked roadside jam trees and wodjil clumps,¹²
these farmers saw prospects that wool and wheat
might bring. But children in country towns also

found time to be happy at play by the salt lakes,
riding their bikes on bush tracks, climbing
high among tors on drenched monoliths to glimpse
brisk-turning windmills in paddocks, or silos
for storage of the brief flush of winter feed.

New to the towns the motion picture shows,
brought by the 'picture man' in his motor van,
had heads whirling with wonder of 'Land of Oz'¹³
and its enticements of the yellow brick road.
And when brought home to bed, well-wrapped
in blankets, from the front porch they glimpse
the evening star's ascendancy. Before sleep
entices to dreams of witches and coming war.

III

WOODGRAIN

(for Kim Scott)

My first sawmill was a revelation—
among those karri trees¹⁴, tall as towers,
and palms sprouting their green elevation
above grass trees, ferns and forest flowers.
But the spinning discs gouted blood of trees
in violent vivisection; sickly breeze

of sawdust piles fresh with the sap that once
drove upward the weight of that great shaft,
mixed now with the pungent smoke of tons
of burning waste-wood, stink of steam draught
from donkey engine, winding fresh logs apace
from their forest felling to the execution place.

You hardly ever saw the stars here—canopy
of the forests shading all below. Sure there
was sun on the river pools, panoply
of spangled reflections everywhere
when breeze riffled surfaces. But winter's stone
cold brought valley mists chilling to the bone.

Until the hiss of weather fronts, lashed
forest crowns, flooded granite outcrops grey,

and joined every brook and creek, splashed
down to the river in its deep trenching way
on a seaward course with a sound so dread—
a low sullen roaring in its turgid bed.

Summer too served these stern coasts, where
sluggish tannin-stained streams insinuate
their way to the Southern Ocean's patient care,
via blackwater reaches and dunes, to the great
white breakers pounding these tumbled rock stores,
last land before Antarctica's sheer ice shores.

When white settlers came, the forest paths here
still served man and yongas¹⁶, western greys,
as they had done for many a thousand year.
Nyungar¹⁵ greeted in friendship, but found it pays
to treat Djanga¹⁷ cautiously. White diseases
laid generations waste as they sought treasures

in glint of certain stones, were frenzied to embrace
materiality. Whites fenced off waterholes, cut lines
of trees, or ringbarked swathes, sought to replace
Nyungar hunting lands with farms and mines.
All my life I have lived here sharing three zones:
salt lakes, wheatfields, coastlands—they're in my bones.

So, these days quietness is reward—evening wind
along beach sands. And in the western sky one
star glimmers first. It is Venus, of course, blind

with love and to some appointed herald of the sun.
A love of this land and hauntings of human lovers
is like coming of day or night with the star that hovers.

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¹ Salmon gums are a tall Western Australian eucalypt (*Eucalyptus salmonophloia*) with vivid pink bark

² Arctic terns from Siberia and North China migrate annually to WA wetlands

³ ‘Dusted’ miners were those who had been afflicted by silicosis from working underground.

⁴ Frasers Mine was the major goldmine of Southern Cross in WA.

⁵ The Nek was a well-known section of the Gallipoli battleground in World War I, while the Somme was scene of trench fighting in France in the same war.

⁶ Lift attendants were once common in elevators which did not operate automatically as today.

⁷ The Goldfields Water Scheme designed by C Y O’Connor in the early 20th century brought fresh water from a hills reservoir near Perth to Kalgoorlie, some 700kms distant inland.

⁸ The kunzea mentioned here (*kunzia baxteri*) is of the hardy myrtle family with distinctive red flowers growing in outback rocky habitats.

⁹ Yorkrakine Rock near Tammin, WA, is a typical large granite monolith in a nature reserve

¹⁰ The Great Southern is the wheatbelt area located north of Albany WA, and stretching north to Narrogin and east to Hyden.

¹¹ Dryandra: a prickly-leaved shrub species of the protea family related to the banksias. Sometimes called parrot-bush.

¹² Jam trees are a species of fine-leaved wattle (*acacia acuminate*). Its wood has the smell of raspberry jam. Wodjil (*acacia beauverdiana*) is the term for this bush which often forms a dense thicket.

¹³ The 1939 Hollywood movie ‘The Wizard of Oz’ was a favourite with children all over the world and ranked one of the best 10 films and the most watched of all time. It was based on a 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L Frank Baum.

¹⁴ Tall WA hardwood eucalypts resembling in size the Californian redwoods.

¹⁵ Nyungar and Bibbulmun are local Aboriginal names for the indigenous people of SW Australia.

¹⁶ Yonga is the Nyungar word for the kangaroo species known as ‘western greys’.

¹⁷ Djanga was the Nyungar word for the first white men encountered and originally meant ‘ghost ancestor’.