

The Wombat Vedas

1

The first night, I sit on the porch, eating rice

from a bowl; wombats rut and sneeze

Beneath my feet, Bach plays at my back, and plovers fly

From the river to tell me nothing, very loudly, all over again. Another wombat drops by,

an overweight god on probation, and sits

munching grass like cornflakes in the dark.

We fought, you and I, when I left. And I drove down here as if all the way back

Into some old autistic childhood. But now, my bags unpacked,

the fire burning, and a three-quarter moon

Edging out of the dark hills behind, loneliness grows slender and stretches out beside me,

and the night is a sackful of stars.

2

The night smells like cowshit when I walk out into it near ten.

At twelve, she's out there still, every pore open: the beloved,

Waiting. Not—admittedly—smelling great, but looking fine.

The sky clears and the moon travels west through thinning cloud.

On the ridge across the river, a truck's tail-light blinks red—she loves

Me, she loves me not—up through the gears, taking the road out

Of the valley. One of the multitude of suns we call stars blinks back

A billion years ago. She loved me, she loved me not, she loved me?

On the sawtooth ridge my window looks onto, there's a large house.

Lit up on a Saturday night, it turns the scarp into a child's

Papier-mache model of the hall of the mountain king, in which

There's a princess who loves me, who loves me not, who loves...

3

The window of the study frames a poem I wish I'd written: sun pale

In close-cropped paddocks, riveroaks

Reprising their two or three smart plays along the river, a pair of welcome swallows, the couple

Who nested fractiously in my sleep, sitting like a semiquaver

In the fencewire, and the timbered ridge

A stockpile of superseded sandstone deities making up the middle distance. Yellow robin

Lands on the wheel of the rusted-out tractor: Take all the time

You need, he says and bows.

Here, take some of mine. Then the wind gusts hard from the west as if not to let you

Forget that her heart's still broken, and she says, Here, take mine—

And I take it and walk

Through the pane, down into the sadness of everything, halfway to the river.

4

I'm writing a kind of confessional ecology here,

and you mustn't believe a word.

The writing isn't meant to tell the truth; it's the way out

of the little one seems to be on one's own. A way

Of ceasing, and beginning (again) farther out. These lines are the roads I take into the world—

Out and back into the Self—a shuffle

performed with a pencil and a voice, and their truth is how

They go, not where they start. But without a doubt: the scarp that rises from the river,

Just where the river bends, is the embodiment of love.

She's the recumbent Buddha in her feminine form—

see, the dip of her waist,

Where you'd like to rest your hand, and the long slow rise to her hip, where you'd like

To run it next—and she's been lying there forgetting herself episodically

For three hundred million years, sleeping all eternity awake.

Throw your soul out far enough and you can feel

how her head is your own head

Pillowed on your own small hands. Never mind

the eucalypt woods like a hundred year growth

6

Outside tonight, though, at 3 AM,

you'd have to call the scene overwritten.

The sheoaks are pulling out Sarasvati's hair, and the eucalypts behind the house

Are a Kathakali dance troupe on the piss. Down along the river,

even the flowing goddess shimmy

And hums—unless that's a trick of the moonshine and the gale.

But, look: this is August, and this is still the headstrong world,

And she'll break every one of the rules of style,

if that's what it pleases her to do.

7

Half a dozen edges meet where I sit

thinking: the coast, the river, the past, the pastures,

The present, the sandstone plateau, the vestigial rainforest. By ear and ethology

And guesswork, I've framed a list of 45 birds in four or five days in the August wind.

But it's not about the count;

it's about the birds. Who've been out there counting

(On nothing) and sounding out everything else and divining time, since it started. The birds

Are the forms and figures in which Vishnu—and, when he tires of it, a goddess who speaks

The holy local idiom—have been writing their own slow ecology

of confession and conducting their long masterclass

In ecotology and the wise amorality of love, since the January of the Bang. Remember that?

You don't find the birds; they find you. You don't find the gods;

They catch you in the act of thinking you had it all together.

They recite you apart and mouth you,

When they're ready, back into the music of everything else. All afternoon, it's the blue wren,

The fire-browed finch, the brown treecreeper, the black and grey orders

of fantail, and, of course, the swallows.

The birds are here to give you

a second chance. These finches, for instance,

Fire where they're going to, fire where they're from. Two days running, I've looked up too late

At bad photocopies of small brown birds in the dusk. This morning they've broken out

Like spot fires, deliberately lit by the sun in the grass at my door. Poetry,

they say, is fire, and, as I sit here feeding mine

With commas, the finches are stepping out the small noisy bells that are every second syllable

Of the rules of the dance of whatever comes next.

But it's not just the firetails. This morning

the weather is turquoise and black,

And then it's red and yellow, chartreuse and navy blue:

The superb fairywren, King of Pop, alone with himself and his mirror

On the wombat-bombed grass. And a pair of rosellas,

girls with no idea how many hearts

They're breaking each second, is lost in the paddock's thoughts along the fenceline.

Three yellowtails, black on black on black, strike a nice chord in a minor key,

and walk it on up the keyboard, all the way

To the oaks by the river. The welcome swallows are giving marriage a good name by my door

In matching chestnut turtlenecks,

invigilating their unhatched young in the mudnest

Under the eaves, and yellow robin, nails freshly painted, is still telling it true but telling it slant

From the top rail of the fence.

Wagtail's back, Shiva in hired tails, to tell me that life

Is only death by daylight, and that it's time again to start again. But I think I'll finish my coffee

First. And then there's a cry I can't name, five guttural phonemes and then four more

from the silkyoak, at the window:

some kind of sclerophyll blessing, I guess, in drag.

11

Ten minutes back in the valley

and I've already been here ten years. I stop

At the crossing and let School Creek teach my feet how to freeze and my body

How to follow. It's hard to say if the shrike-thrush auditioned

for the river or the river

For the shrike-thrush. Light late winter rain among coachwoods

Is a loose green mantra, and there's nothing here that shouldn't be here,

And only the future's missing from the intimate universe the falling rain manifests.

The weather is singing the mellow brown

bluegrass the lyrebird likes to sing,

And sure enough, dragging my feet, like a river, back upstream to the hut,

I rouse two young birds from the bracken fern,

As if from their bed, and they run, laughing mellifluously,

Over the satin-slick road, carrying their tails like shed clothing

Hastily regathered. And all the way home,

afternoon mimics every cry

the birds were too busy making out to make up.

12

The landscape's stalking me again.

Every time I look out there, she's out there.

It's never over with her. Always some old intimacy to workshop,

Some new wound to open up. Under the house

the wombats settle in for as long as it takes:

Not hibernating, not even thinking about it. Heckling disagreement with pretty much everything

I thought I knew. By day the landscape is several talking books all talking at once. By night

She's music: you have to make up what she means from how she makes you feel,

her reach a little longer than your grasp.

Rain overnight seeps into my sleep

like the last waters of the world's loveliest river,

Losing their way in the desert. The perfumed hair of the mother

Of the Vedas sweeps my face,

and all her art and music and her fiery science peter

Into the street-jibing Sanskrit of my dreams, and I wake in her wake

And carry her sorrow down to the river—the actual river (of morning).

Your emotions are much older than you are.

Like gods they come, and like gods they go, and there is no holding them to account.

A thing the sheoaks know and recount

as I pass under them

in the last rites of the rain.

In the old stories, they are the wailing women; the waters of Babylon lie down in them,

And no one lives especially happily ever after. From a distance

The wind at its harvest among the trees sounds like a freeway across an empty valley;

Up close it is all the forgotten languages

forgetting themselves again. And again, and

At the river the tracks of roos are a literature of thirst

written in the dark all the way to the low-water mark.

Everything ends. Nothing ends. Everything starts

somewhere else. Some say the river I have in mind

Began in the roots of the tree of heaven in the highest mountains earth knows; some say

She started in a cup in Brahma's own hands.

And where she stopped being a river and started

Being a goddess, no one will say. (For gods don't begin, really, and they surely never end.)

But it was all a long time and a long way

from here. She slaked a desert, that one, coining a language of fire.

Whose sweet-savage cadences still drop from the escarpment here

and wash my feet this morning on their way

to see what's what in Nowra.

14

Eleven pm, and a soft and melancholy day

clears to a rowdy and translucent night. One kind of affair

Always tapers into the other. The moment you're used to it—if not before—it's over.

The river ran with valley fog this morning; tonight it shelters from the wind and the stars

Are being dusted within a light year of their brilliant lives.

Sometime in between, when I wasn't paying much attention, cloud lifted,

peeling my mood off with it.

Fancy a flash fuck, the beloved asks, a thing that takes longer to assent to

Than arrange. And just like that

the weather of everything changes, as if for good.

15

Overnight the wind tries to rip the roof

from over my head and the wombats try

One more time to jack the cottage off its footings. This is why one comes

To the country—the kind of serenity cities know nothing of.

You came, too, in the night. Quietly.

I won't go into details, but it turns out you're quite a good kisser. And I slept right through that, too,

And I woke in the eye of the valley's storm,

half the forest fallen over the only way out.

And now from my desk at the window, I watch the wind get on

with pulling the alphabet of the given world apart.

16

The river's lost its train of thought;

it unspools, out of its mind,

Searching north and south for where the hell it thought it was. Or someone was.

On the higher ground where the river has forgotten

It used to run, back in the divine era, a symposium of kangaroos

In its ranks and files

is thinking inside the square again.

But when they hear me coming—

On the last morning the bluewren

got the oils out and painted the day

On his face, with a heavy hand. The way Vincent put it down—all that plangent silence—

On canvas. The finches show. The grey fantail. Jacky Winter,

Shy now of the encroaching equinox. And the swallows, of course,

Their long welcome finally worn out. Heard, like children on the phone,

But not seen—the whipbird reversing the charges,

the magpie and the magpie lark,

dialling in long distance,

The spinebill on Skype.

Four galahs fly past in formation.

Dip their wings.

Rosellas ring the bells. All the cacophonous habits farewell wears. And finally, the wagtail,

In spray-on cassock and surplice, pivots in the pulpit

High in the silkyoak and drags out his ending, canting and canting the taut phrases

Of his denouement. We're done here.

See you in the next life.

The road out of this place—the road in, too,

but that's another story—

Was put on with a paintbrush,

and I'm not talking about the colour.

It doesn't have to be so shapely, surely. The road is a grace note

Sustained through twenty-five ks of polyphonous scrub,

a bulldozed facsimile of the river's

Imitation of the spiritual life of the heron,

and taking it is like being taken the first time all over again.

Remember? The road makes the same kind of sense

of the senseless discourse of the landscape

That sex makes of the body, and life makes of death.

If you have to go, go this way. This is the only way out.

—Mark Tredinnick

